

Release to the Captives

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 27 January 2013, by David Gill. Readings for the third Sunday after the Epiphany were 1 Corinthians 12-31a and St Luke 4:14-21

We have just heard Luke's account of how Jesus began his public ministry. He had been baptized. He had been agonizing over his calling in the wilderness. Now he's back in Nazareth.

But meanwhile, reports about him have been spreading. The local boy has been getting quite a name for himself. Now he's home again, and the locals can size him up for themselves.

It is the Sabbath. Jesus attends the synagogue, where he is asked to read. Given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, he opts to read these words:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

He rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the attendant, sits down. The atmosphere is expectant. Then comes the shocker. Today, he says, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Unimaginable! Jesus, their Jesus, Joseph's son, is claiming the ancient prophetic words as his own personal mission statement. This, he is telling them, is who I am. This is what my life is for.

The rest, as they say, is history. He doesn't just articulate that magnificent vision. He proceeds to live it. Until eventually it kills him.

A riveting story, to be sure. But -- so long ago. So very long ago. Yes, they said that death was not the end of him. But, whatever we make of that, clearly the Jesus of flesh and blood is no longer with us. The Jesus who walked this earth, the Jesus who embodied that magnificent vision, has gone.

Or has he?

Recall today's first reading. Paul was writing to Christians in Corinth. His concern was their disunity, sparked by some argument they'd been having about spiritual gifts. He reminds them what it means to be church, using the image of the human body.

A familiar analogy. Colossians and Ephesians both refer to Christ as the head and the church as the rest of the body. But that's not what Paul is telling the Corinthians. He's saying Christ *is* the body. That body is one. We're all bits of it. We all have gifts for ministry: gifts that differ, gifts that come to life in the context of the body as a whole.

Paul is not starry-eyed. He knows the human frailty of believers. Still he is able to write that the church is Christ's embodiment in time and space. Wrap your head around that! It's us Paul is talking about folks: St Stephen's, with our creaky knees and our leaky roof. Us! The embodiment of Christ, here and now. Wow!

We'd better look again at that mission statement. It was Christ's. If Paul is right, it's ours as well. *We*, in company with all Christ's people across the world, are to bear good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed. How are we going in that vocation?

It would be fair to say, I think, that the Christian record for standing with the poor and the oppressed has been, well, patchy. OK that's an understatement. At times, our record has been an utter disgrace. And we know it.

Today, for example, has been designated by the United Nations as International Holocaust Remembrance Day. January 27th marks the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp, in 1945. The world remembers the millions who died in that camp and others like it, primarily Jews but also gypsies, gay people, victims of medical experiments, political dissidents and the handicapped. We as Christians hang our heads, remembering not only that some churches were complicit or silent in the face of the Nazi horror, but also that certain attitudes deeply entrenched in the Christian tradition actually

played a role in enabling the horror to happen. Some of those attitudes, moreover – I’m thinking of anti-Semitism, racism and homophobia -- are still with us today.

The good news is that we’re learning! There have also been many positives in the church’s record, particularly during the past half century. Recent decades have seen the churches standing up to be counted, in this country as in others, to challenge structures, policies and attitudes that harm the poor and marginalised. The World Council of Churches has pushed us to think and act outside our national and cultural, as well as denominational, boxes. Catholics have heard much about God’s “preferential option for the poor”. Not everyone has agreed with our stances, of course. Not everything we’ve done has turned out to be wise. But the church community today, more than in some centuries past, is trying to take seriously the mission statement of its Lord.

That, however, should not be construed as an invitation to self-satisfaction. The church has a recurring tendency to fall short of its mission statement. What distracts us, sometimes corrupts us, is not so much fuzzy thinking, indifference or hard-heartedness. It is the dangerous allure of worldly power.

Sometimes we cuddle up too closely to power that’s being exercised by others.

The 1978 Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops had, as one of its major concerns, summoning Anglicans worldwide to a renewed solidarity with the poor. One Sunday morning, conference participants debated and adopted an excellent statement to that effect. That same afternoon, everyone was bussed to Westminster Abbey for evensong, then to Buckingham Palace for a garden party.

As 400+ bishops and their camp followers filed into the palace, a military band struck up with excerpts from the musical *Oliver*. “Consider yourself at home,” the music invited us. “Consider yourself one of the family”. It was very sweet, very seductive. It was also, if you thought about it, quite scary. These church leaders had gone from solidarity with the poor to solidarity with the rich in just a few hours. And, I admit it, for most of us, being with the rich was so much more congenial, more comfortable, more alluring.

Sometimes the problem is not so much that we've been seduced by secular power. It is that we are preoccupied with the power of the church itself.

Anxieties about denominational status and privilege were on display the very day modern Australia was born. Plans were well advanced for that historic day, 1 January 1901. In a ceremony at Centennial Park, the Commonwealth of Australia was to be proclaimed and its first governor-general sworn in. At the last minute, however, there was a hitch. An unholy row had erupted between the Anglican archbishop of Sydney and his Roman Catholic counterpart over which of them should have precedence in the official procession.

After much huffing and puffing the Anglican won. Cardinal Moran withdrew from the proceedings altogether. Not to be outdone, leaders of the Wesleyan, Methodist and Presbyterian churches decided to boycott things as well. It was not one of religion's better days!

Since then, thank God, the ecumenical movement has dragged us, screaming, a very long way. Still, however, ecclesiastical self-interest can cast a pall over the church's witness.

We see it, currently, whirling around the government's proposed Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Bill. Unfortunately, in my view, the draft renews the existing right of religious organisations to bar those they don't like from jobs in their churches, schools, hospitals and charities. There is no need to retain a privilege one commentator calls "a bigots' charter!"

Pressure for such an across-the-board right to discriminate is coming from representative bodies like the Australian Catholic bishops Conference, as well as from unrepresentative bodies like the self-appointed Australian Christian Lobby. The Uniting Church, I'm glad to say, takes a different line. Our church sees no reason why religious organisations should be exempt from anti-discrimination laws, except where appointments to significant leadership roles are being made. If we're ordaining someone, it is fair enough to ask whether the candidate holds the Christian faith as we understand it. If we're appointing a gardener at Knox Grammar School, it's not.

What is going on, behind the rhetoric about religious freedom, is an attempt to retain ecclesiastical privilege. It has led John McIntyre, the Anglican bishop of Gippsland, to comment: “How bizarre that the followers of Jesus Christ would oppose, and ask for exemption from, a legal instrument that has at its heart a declaration of the dignity and value of every human life and the basic rights of every person”.

Bizarre indeed. And embarrassing. But when rights claimed by religious bodies are at stake, bizarre and embarrassing things do happen.

Jesus, tempted in the wilderness, did not succumb to the allure of worldly authority. He rejected it. His mission statement pointed him, as it points us, away from the ever enticing love of power, towards the never failing power of love. Which is a very different thing.

May the Spirit of the Lord be upon us at St Stephen’s. Yes, us. Through *our* life and witness may the poor gain hope, whether it’s their souls or their bodies that are starved. May captives experience freedom, whether they are prisoners in a jail or prisoners in a mansion. May the blind receive sight, whether it’s cataract surgery in an effective national health system or the scales of prejudice falling off the eyes of a bigot. May the oppressed be set free, whether the oppressor is a brutal political regime, an addictive drug or a racist radio shockjock.

And to our loving, liberating, life-giving God be the glory.

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