

Imagine the scene

A sermon preached by Revd Charles Draper on Sunday 24 January 2016 in St Peter's Church Wolvercote

Imagine the scene. The synagogue, full of people who have come to worship on the Sabbath. A young man standing up to read from the scriptures. A warm, friendly reading from Isaiah 61, full of hope. And then an extraordinary sermon, summed up in one short simple, yet quite shocking statement, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Today! Right now! No longer a vague hope of something that might happen sometime in the distant future – no, Jesus says – this is happening now! God is back in town! It's the same message we find at the beginning of Marks' Gospel. "The time has come! The kingdom of God is at hand!" Now!

Of course John the Baptist had said something similar. But there is a big difference. Like the old prophets, John the Baptist saw God's coming as a threat – God is coming – be very afraid! – that was how John the Baptist saw it.

But Jesus could not be more different. He has come, he says, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." For Jesus, the coming of God is good news – good news for the poor, freedom for the oppressed, recovery of sight for the blind – not a threat but good news – good news for those who most need it.

And this is what the coming of Jesus is all about. Not founding a church, not starting a new religion, but good news for the world – good news for all who are vulnerable or in need – and that includes all of us.

People have often discussed whether Jesus meant this to be taken literally or spiritually – literally blind or spiritually blind – literally poor or spiritually poor. But in Jesus' ministry there is no such distinction. He heals those who are literally blind – but he also opens people's eyes to see things in new ways. He constantly speaks up for those who are literally poor, but he also speaks up for those who are oppressed by religion – wanting to release people from the anxious burden of the religious Law so they can find a joyful freedom in their relationship with God.

What we have here is, in effect, a Vision Statement – Jesus' own Vision Statement – carefully chosen verses from Isaiah. And it has some connections with our Vision Statement, I'm glad to say! And like our Vision Statement, it has an outward aspect – the outward, literal physical dimension – and also an inward aspect – what is going on inside us. That's what our Lent Course is all about – looking at both – what we do outwardly as a church, and also what's going on inside us, in our personal faith. That's a quick plug for the Lent Course!

But let's look at how that works here, in this passage Jesus quotes from Isaiah 61. The outward dimension is very clear. It begins with "Good news to the Poor". And that means as a church we are called to be good news for the poor, quite literally. Whether it's those starving people besieged in Syria, or the forgotten millions in central Africa who find that Global Warming is changing their farmlands to desert. Or the homeless in our own country. Or those who are anxious or lonely or vulnerable – poverty comes in many different forms. And we are called to be good news, through our giving, through the way we live, through our prayers, and through our love and care for our neighbour.

And then - "Recovery of sight for the blind" – this is surely about any kind of illness or disability – and God's work of healing, whether through prayer, or through medical treatment and the advances of medical science, or through those simple acts of loving attention and care we can all offer – it's all part of God's work of healing – healing in all different levels, and in all different ways.

And then “Release for the captives” and “Freedom for the oppressed” – again we can take this very literally – whether it’s about human trafficking and the modern slave trade, or political prisoners in many parts of the world, or those oppressed by unfair trade and unjust financial structures.

And we are called as a church to be Good News literally in all these areas, through our outward actions and the choices we make, as well as through prayer and through giving.

But there is also the inward dimension, where Jesus is bringing us good news too – good news that touches us personally. For example, the poor can include us as well, where we ourselves are vulnerable. Sometimes we need to be self aware enough to recognise our own vulnerability – to strip away our defences so that the love of God can touch us in the places where we are vulnerable too.

And the promise of freedom is for us too. How important it is that our faith in Christ doesn’t bind us but brings us freedom. Whether it’s freedom from fear, every time we discover again that we can trust God to help us face the challenges of life that throw us into panic. Or freedom from the burden of having to achieve and be successful, when we discover that God loves us just as we are and all we have to be is our true selves. Or the freedom to think for ourselves – not having a religion that tells us exactly what we ought to think and believe, but a liberating faith in Christ that invites us to explore and question and discover for ourselves.

And that leads on to the wonderful image of giving sight to the blind. When I was a Curate many years ago, we ran a diocesan Christian Faith Course, and when we were exploring personal faith and living the Christian life, we used a “Blindfold” walk, where one person is blindfolded while another person guides them. It’s a powerful picture of trust and I’ve often used it and still do. And yet, it’s not quite right...Because following Christ is not blind faith, blindly following. On the contrary, I believe Jesus invites us to learn to open our eyes and look and see and learn. For me, trusting Jesus is about believing we are walking through life with him, looking around us, exploring, learning, and trusting that he is guiding us as we do so.

Thomas Merton encourages us to “A close attention to reality at every moment, and great fidelity to God as He reveals himself obscurely, in the mystery of each new situation”. Or, as Esther de Waal puts it more simply, “People often think that the basic command of religion is “Do this!” or “Don’t do that!” It isn’t. It’s look and wonder. Learn to give attention to the world around you.”

So Jesus comes, not to give us a blind faith, but to open our eyes to see.

So has all this got anything to say to us in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity? Well one thing perhaps. Christian Unity too has an outward side – good ecumenical structures and a decision of the will to work together. But it also has an inward side. If faith in Christ is about freedom, and about opening our eyes to learn and discover new things, then we will not be afraid of Christians who are different from us, but will want to learn with them and learn from them. And if we can learn not to defend ourselves but to share our vulnerability with each other, then we will find a very deep unity indeed.

So Jesus’ vision is good news at all levels – both outwardly for the world, and inwardly for each one of us. It’s a call to action to be good news for the world – and it’s an invitation – to discover what this good news can mean inwardly for each one of us. An invitation to discover God where we too are vulnerable, to discover faith in Christ as something liberating and life giving, and an invitation to open our eyes to see, to learn, and to grow.