

**3rd Sunday After Epiphany – St Paul’s Manuka
24 January, 2015.**

Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12: 12-31

Luke 4: 14-21.

In our Gospel Jesus speaks powerfully and his ministry is inaugurated in Galilee in a dramatic way. He burst onto the scene as the culmination of his baptismal anointing by the Spirit. Jesus was baptised by John and the Spirit descended upon him giving him divine power. Jesus is filled with the Spirit we are told as he begins his ministry. It is obvious to everyone in the synagogue that he is full of the Spirit’s presence and power and the reports circulating about him tell of the impact he is making. It is in this power and with this notoriety that he appears in the synagogue in Nazareth and beyond.

In Jewish synagogues there was a tradition that adult males could speak. They would chose a passage of Scripture and expound it. Jesus as an adult Jewish male stands and has his turn at speaking. He chooses a very powerful passage from Isaiah which talks about the Spirit being present to bring about great and good work in the lives of people. Jesus’ words and Isaiah’s words speak about change. Jesus is nailing his colours to the mast declaring who he is and what power he has. When he says: ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’ he is really saying he is the Messiah and that he is God. Jesus is taking the initiative here and declaring his purpose and proclaiming his power. As we read we can see that he is dominating the whole scene. Jesus is saying to the synagogue congregation that his presence and power were predicted by the prophet Isaiah and now he is now fulfilling that prophecy in the sight of all and in spectacular ways.

The people who listened would have known the background here. They would have known of the prophet Isaiah’s prediction and so they would have understood the power of what Jesus is saying.

It is in the power of his baptism and his anointing with the Spirit that Jesus speaks, setting out his program and it is in this power that he acts.

The program that Jesus outlines on the basis of Isaiah’s prophecy is a radical program of social reform. People he says will be released from what binds and troubles them. People will be free. People will be able to

see things in a new way and people will live in a freedom that brings with it new possibilities. Jesus declares the year of the Lord's favour. What he is speaking about here is spiritual restoration, moral transformation, rescue from evil and release from the troubles that bind people and shut them up.

I think Jesus knew exactly what he was doing and saying here. He knew he was making the most radical of statements and he wanted to create a dramatic impact. He wanted his words to ram home and to have a startling effect on people.

He seems to have achieved this aim since we are told that as he rolled up the scroll, taking his time and pausing in this action, everyone in the synagogue was looking at him. You can perhaps imagine the atmosphere at the time. All were silent. All were staring at him. Some were wide-eyed. Amazement was all around. Clearly those who were watching and listening were aware of Jesus' power and presence but they were aware too of the impact of his words as he claimed divine status.

It was a moment of great power but if we read the next few verses, not in our Gospel passage today, we also become aware that for some all this was just too much. They started to question him and some even wanted to kill him to shut him up. When Jesus stands and declared the year of the Lord's favour he is really creating a big problem for some of the listeners. Jesus is saying that the Lord's favour is for all people – outcasts like prisoners, the oppressed, the refugee and the disabled. For those with narrow hearts and narrow vision this is just too much to bear. They thought they were so special in the eyes of God and so they thought they had God's favour in an exclusive way – locking others out and locking others up. The favour of the Lord was not for everyone in their eyes. But Jesus has other ideas – more inclusive ideas. Jesus knew that for some the claim of his divine status and the radical transformation of the world and the call to justice for all was just too much for some to hear. The same is true today. For some the claims of Jesus are impossible to accept and for some the call to justice for all is also too hard.

It has always been like this. There are some, even within the church, who feel that the favour of the Lord is exclusively theirs and that somehow they own it and control it. We have seen this very attitude at work in the recent Primates' Meeting in Canterbury where some believe that the gospel is an exclusive message and where they have been too eager to exclude some who do not fit into a narrow moral agenda. But this is not

Jesus' way. This is not how Jesus lived his life. This is not how St Paul understood it when he spoke to the Corinthians. For Paul all the members of the body are one in Christ. There are no Greeks or Jews, slaves or free – we are all one. And yet there are still those within the church who want to argue for an exclusive position for certain people. In the life we live in Christ there is no room for such discrimination. We cannot exclude women from ministry or those of other orientations from the full life and worship of the Church. We cannot say that the church is only for a certain sort of people or just our sort of people. We are, says Paul, one body in Christ and so we all stand equal before God. There are many members but there is only one body. There is not a special body for those who want to discriminate against people on the basis of race, religion, gender, age, status, intellectual ability or orientation. We all stand together before Christ on the same level and we all by virtue of our baptism stand in the power of the Spirit and in full membership of our church. This is why membership of the church, access to the Scriptures and the sacraments should not be limited to our rational ability to understand what is happening. It is not about us. It is about what God has done for us. God's actions, ultimately revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord, are for all people.

The question for you and me then is how do we proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God and how do we live as one body in Christ? First it seems that we have all been gifted by God. There is a variety of gifts but it is the one Spirit that enables us all in ministry. Second we need to recognise one another's gifts and seek to minister in ways that complement God's gifts given in the lives of all God's people. Third we need to be careful that we do not put down others and their gifts. Not all gifts are like ours and not all gifts are the same but they are all God's gifts and so worthy of respect. Fourth and this is really quite important – we need to use our gifts. God's has not given us gifts just so we can talk about them or look at them. God has given us gifts to use.

This has implications for us all. The question we each need to ask is: 'What gifts do I have?' and 'How am I using my God-given gifts?'

Jesus comes amongst us in power and love. Jesus proclaims that things will be different and Jesus brings us a radical message, not a comfortable one. Jesus calls you and me to service and acceptance of others and the use of our gifts. It is only by such acceptance and use of our gifts that we can proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.