

Jesus' Preaching and Its Effects Luke 4:14-44

Preached at 8.15, C@10 and CC on 20th March 2016

The Content of Jesus' Preaching - Himself

Some time after Jesus' victory over the devil in the desert, he travels north to the region of Galilee where he'd grown up.

He'd already gained a reputation as a respected teacher as we can see from v15, teaching the Jews from God's word in their synagogues.

When he got to his home town of Nazareth, he did what he normally did on the Sabbath day.

In the synagogue any competent person could be asked to read and teach, and Jesus was obviously asked to read and teach from the Scriptures on this day.

The passage he chooses is Isaiah 61:1-2, although the bit about freedom for the oppressed comes from Isaiah 58:6.

After he reads it, he rolls up the scroll to give back to the guy who looked after them – remember they weren't all sitting there with their own scrolls or 'i-scrolls' – there was probably only one copy in the synagogue.

Then Jesus sits down. That doesn't mean he went back to his seat. The teacher would sit down in front of the group to teach – just like we usually stand up to do it.

As he sat down the people couldn't take their eyes off him as they waited to hear what this new, increasingly popular teacher from their own town had to say to them.

So he began (in v21) by telling them that this passage of Scripture was fulfilled that day as they listened to him.

Jesus says he's come to preach:

- Good news for the poor
- Freedom for the prisoners
- New sight for the blind

- Release for the oppressed, and
- The arrival of the time of God's favour

And the people (in v22) are amazed to hear the son of their village carpenter, Joseph, delivering such a hopeful message to encourage them.

God originally spoke this message to the people of Israel who were living in exile 700 years earlier through the prophet Isaiah.

They were the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed... taken captive from their homeland and imprisoned under the rule of a foreign power, unable to worship their God as they'd been taught to.

God's message to them through Isaiah was that he was coming to rescue them from their poverty, their captivity, their blindness and oppression.

And after 70 years their captivity did come to an end, and the survivors returned to the land God had given them.

In one sense, Isaiah's prophecy had been fulfilled.

But Israel was still no more than a shadow of its former glory days.

Even though they were physically in the land, they were a long way from God as a community.

And that was evident in their community life.

Externally they still weren't free – they were still under a foreign power – now the Roman Empire.

And internally, oppression and greed left many of the people poor and helpless.

Much of what Isaiah prophesied hadn't yet been fulfilled.

But Jesus is saying that it was fulfilled that day in the synagogue as they heard him speak.

That raises the question of what people understood him to mean by that.

People like old Simeon who had been at the temple when the 8-day old Jesus was brought along by Mary and Joseph said this when he saw Jesus:

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation,” (Luke 2:29–30 NIV)

God had revealed to Simeon that Jesus himself is the salvation for the world that he and faithful people like him had been waiting for.

But the people in the synagogue listening to Jesus understood him to be saying that God was about to bring an end to Roman rule and restore ‘poor’ Israel to its glory days.

It’s no wonder their initial response to the words he speaks is so positive.

To them, the year of God’s favour meant just being a Jew meant being part of a new glory days like the times of David and Solomon.

And that’s a pride bubble that Jesus is very quick to stick a pin into – which he does in v25-27 using the example of the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

They were both revered as prophets, but Jesus points out that it wasn’t the entire nation that benefitted from their ministry, but only a chosen minority – and at least one of them wasn’t even a Jew!

The nation refused to listen to God as he spoke through Elijah and Elisha.

And so instead of God’s favour, they experienced God’s judgment in famine and plague, while even Gentiles were being shown God’s provision and healing.

Jesus tells these Jews of his home town that the same will apply to them if they refuse to listen to him – which he predicts they’ll do.

They fall for that lie of the devil and demand to put Jesus to the test before they’ll believe him, even though v23 says they’ve heard about the God-only miracles that he’d been doing.

The time of God’s favour, freedom from oppression, healing, and abundant provision doesn’t come automatically to anyone.

It comes as people hear Jesus proclaim that this all comes only to those who hear, listen to him and believe him.

Jesus isn't just the messenger of God's salvation – he is God's salvation.

Old Simeon at the temple got that.

When Jesus preached at the synagogue that day, he proclaimed that God's salvation is fulfilled in himself as he speaks, and as people hear, listen and believe.

And you can see what their reaction to that was, as they attempted to kill him.

Offense of Jesus' Preaching

There are some things we just don't want to hear, aren't there.

I've been putting off a regular visit to my GP for a while because I'm pretty sure he's going to tell me that my cholesterol hasn't improved.

And I know the next question will be about how my exercise regime's going...

They're things I need to hear so I can do something about them.

People instinctively don't want to hear that there's no salvation apart from listening to Jesus and believing in him.

Australians have our "she'll be right" attitude to everything, don't we?

It's offensive to hear that everything won't be right unless we hear and pay attention to Jesus.

In other words, there's no salvation without the gospel.

We don't want to hear that because it says something about us that we find hard to accept.

It says that we are poor, blind, oppressed captives who need rescuing.

There's nothing we have and nothing we can do to make us deserving of God's favour. Instead, we're poor sinful beggars who can do nothing but beg God for his mercy.

And we've been blinded to the fact that we're captives under the rule of Satan who oppresses us by using our sinfulness to keep us apart from the God who loves us.

We all desperately need Jesus to set us free.

Essentially what Jesus was saying at Nazareth is that the exile hasn't ended until people are set free from the power and oppressive rule of the devil.

And the best good news story of all time is that Jesus proclaims that's what he came to do.

That's why Luke puts this episode immediately after Jesus' victory over the devil in the desert... to show that Jesus is powerful to defeat him.

As we hear and believe the good news of the gospel we are rescued from his oppressive rule and brought under the good rule of God's Son.

But we can't be rescued if we don't accept that we need rescuing.

We're like a drowning man in the middle of the ocean with no hope of making it to shore, saying to a rescue boat "I'll be ok" when we refuse to listen to Jesus.

Good news is only good news to people who'll listen to it and believe it.

If we respond to the gospel in the way the people at Nazareth responded to Jesus' words, we'll push him away like they did.

And we'll miss out on the salvation that the gospel promises.

The gospel must offend and break through our proud self-sufficiency if it's going to be truly good news for us.

And we remain in exile, away from God, until we realise that's where we are, and start believing the gospel that proclaims freedom from sin and the devil through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Priority of Jesus' Preaching

When I was a student minister at Liverpool South there was a visiting speaker from a Christian organisation speaking one day about the work of his organisation.

I can't remember exactly what passage he used, but he was trying to encourage people to be supporting their work of fighting for social justice and poverty relief, by suggesting that Jesus was more concerned to heal and give relief to the sick and the poor than he was about preaching.

My boss David and I looked at each other in disbelief, and it was the closest I ever came to standing up and interrupting a preacher.

His concern for those causes was admirable.

But his justification was wrong and ultimately playing into the devil's hands.

From v31-41 Jesus had moved on from Nazareth and came up against people suffering from demon-possession and all kinds of illnesses, and he healed them.

And it's easy to make the mistake of thinking that Jesus' words are just that – words about his real mission which is seen in his many healing miracles.

But that's getting it back to front.

The miracles are demonstrations of the power of his word in the gospel to release all people from the effects of Satan's oppressive rule once and for all.

Otherwise Jesus would probably still be here doing the same things.

But he isn't. He didn't even make it his priority at that time.

In v42-44 Jesus left behind more sick people than he healed, saying that his priority was to keep preaching the good news of the Kingdom in other towns.

And that's what he did.

The saying 'actions speak louder than words' is an attractive saying in these days when words are cheap and so many people don't deliver on their word.

But that's not the case when it comes to the gospel.

Have you heard the Christian version? 'Preach the gospel and if necessary use words'.

I'm sure it's well-intended to encourage Christians about the importance of doing good to all people – which is absolutely true.

But without the word of the gospel, people are still in exile, away from God and under the oppressive rule of Satan.

No matter how much good we do for those people, they'll remain in exile forever unless they hear and believe the gospel.

And while our good deeds might testify to the power of the word of the gospel, people can't believe if they don't hear the gospel.

So ministry and mission that's limited to alleviating physical needs or educating people or building hospitals – or a whole range of other very good and necessary things – isn't gospel ministry if it doesn't have the aim ultimately of speaking the gospel.

Whatever we do as a church we do with the intention of having opportunities to speak the gospel.

Take Playtime as an example. Playtime is a good thing to do in and of itself.

But we have a playtime because we want parents and children to hear the gospel – and I know that's what the ladies who run it want to see... in conversations, in the kids' stories and songs, and when we invite the families to special church services.

There are plenty of playgroups. There are lots of groups fighting for social justice and caring for homeless and needy people.

Only Christians can speak the gospel.

That doesn't mean Christians shouldn't get involved in doing practical good – whether that's speaking out on behalf of poor and oppressed people or going overseas to help build a school for a poor village in Africa.

But none of those things will ultimately help anyone who doesn't believe in Jesus.

So we need to set our priority in line with Jesus' priority.

Our priority is to see people return from exile – and that will only happen as the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection is preached by Christians.

Conclusion

Until Jesus returns we still live in a world where the devil has power to cause misery and suffering.

Christians will still suffer even though he has no power over us.

Christians will get sick... some will be exiled from their homelands... we'll be bullied, ostracised and excluded – some even killed – for our faith in Jesus.

While God is with us in the person of the Holy Spirit, we are not yet face to face with him.

We are still away from God.

This world isn't our home.

But the gospel is the word that assures us that it won't be this way forever when we believe in Jesus.

That's the best good news of all time. It's the news that every human being needs to hear more than they need anything else.