

Last week Fleur spoke of her love of literature where events are intentionally inserted by the writer in order to highlight a crucial message, and today's reading illustrates that in spades. This passage, of Jesus teaching in his hometown synagogue is also recounted in Matthew and Mark.

However, Luke's account is not only fuller than the other two, but also has deliberately been placed out of sequence so it immediately follows on from the accounts of Jesus being baptised by the Spirit, led into the wilderness by the Spirit, and now starting his public ministry filled with the power of the Spirit.

And what's more, Jesus selects a text to read that will not only become his mission statement for the remainder of his earthly life but also unequivocally identifies him as the Messiah. A crucial message indeed!

And it all starts with Jesus arriving in his hometown of Nazareth where he knows the people, many by name. In all likelihood, there will be relatives and close-family friends present at the synagogue. All the male villagers from time to time will have read out the scripture just as Jesus does, in just the same way as Michael has just done. Sorry Gilly, not like you did - women were not allowed into the main hall, not allowed to read and would only have been able to hear Jesus from an anteroom.

Jesus would have stood on a small, raised platform in the middle of the synagogue as was the custom, to read from the scroll. By comparison with the grand temple and larger synagogues in Jerusalem and the major cities, the synagogue in Nazareth would have been both plain and small – probably about a quarter of the size of this church.

Everyone would have been keen to see and hear Jesus clearly. After all, this is the lad they all knew, Mary and Joseph's son. He has their full attention.

Empowered by the Spirit he reads words written by Isaiah offering hope and vindication to the marginalized, the disadvantaged, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. Then, with all eyes on him he goes to sit down. Sitting down is something only the rabbi would normally do as a sign that he was starting to teach.

A quiet buzz goes around...O.M.G...this is am-az-ing. This is something out of the ordinary. The local lad teaching! Maybe the rumours about Jesus being called 'Raboni' are true after all.

All eyes are focussed on Jesus. The buzz quietens down. But then Jesus drops the equivalent of a first century bombshell:

"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

And then he continues and tells them truths they do not want to hear.

Boom.

Their amazement turns to bewilderment, to anger and finally to outrage. How dare he? Who does he think he is? This young upstart...how dare he say that God's blessing and his kingdom is intended for Jew and Gentile alike? Blasphemy! In just 8 words, Jesus has turned the lives and expectations of the assembly upside down. No way can it be true that the carpenter's son is the Messiah. From welcoming him, they turn on him and reject him – a foretaste of the Easter passion when the rejoicing crowd welcome Jesus into Jerusalem only to turn on him and demand his crucifixion – if ever there was one. Blasphemy!

So, what can we learn today, from those events? Luke not only wants us to know how Jesus' ministry began but also how the Holy Spirit was integral to the unfolding events.

It's as if the Holy Spirit is teaching Jesus what is the reality of God's plan not only for him but also for us today: to say no to evil and yes to God's love and goodness for all people. To say no to self-glory in all its forms and yes to helping the poor and the oppressed. To say no to trying to get God to work for us and yes to us working for God with urgency and compassion.

If we are to model Jesus' ministry, then this reading is one we should be returning to time and time again because as you continue to read through Luke, we discover that the Spirit is particularly active when it comes to those on the bottom rung of society. It is the poor, the marginalized and the disadvantaged who are identified as being worthy recipients of Jesus' grace filled ministry.

We have the considerable advantage of knowing how Jesus' ministry pans out and know how it is integrally linked with the power of the Holy Spirit; a gift he left to the early church. When you think about it, the Spirit is the only thing the early church had going for it; they had no buildings, no budget, no paid staff – the reverse of most western churches today.

And that is why we need to keep returning to this passage. To remind ourselves.....or maybe to understand for the very first time..... that our mission and ministry priority can only be sustained and driven forward in the power of the Holy Spirit.

You might be asking yourself - How can we know that we have the power of the Holy Spirit? Well, one simple answer is that the Holy Spirit prompts us about doing something for God and making time to do it. And there's no doubt that the Holy Spirit has prompted many of us over recent months and years to help the marginalized, the poor, the food and financially disadvantaged both in our local community, wider society and indeed throughout the world. And we will have a further opportunity of doing so by supporting Child Action Lanka once again in our Lent Appeal.

Just think for a moment what might change in our lives, in our community and in the life of this church if we corporately declared to God and one another 'Come Holy Spirit, show me what more I can do or how best I can help to fulfil today's scripture'. That would be good news to hear, understand and accept.

Now, in closing, I must confess to being a little anxious as to how prophetic today's reading might be. This has been my home church for just over 40 years. One of you listening is married to me, all of you know me to a greater or lesser extent; some of you might even like me and call me friend.

Like Jesus, today I want to share important good news and I hope what I've said has amazed you.....but I've been praying all week that when I finish you don't get furious, seize me and march me out intending to throw me under a passing lorry.... Time, I suppose to put that to the test.

I'm offering you the opportunity to either throw me under the passing lorry or join with me in accepting the good news heard today by saying with me the words on the screen:

'Come Holy Spirit, show me what more I can do or how best I can help to fulfil today's scripture'. Amen

**Revd. Terry Ward-Hall, 26/1/25**