

Sunday January 27th 2019

Luke 4: 14-21 / 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a

Prayer: Lord we thank you for the gift of your Word and as we think on these things open our hearts and minds to hear your word to us. Amen

During this season of Epiphany our focus is on the beginning of Jesus' ministry – and in particular those things which illustrate just who he was and what was his mission.

God the Father had confirmed who Jesus was at his baptism – his son who he loved - and the Spirit of God had been visibly seen descending on him and empowering him. News about Jesus was beginning to spread; he taught in the synagogues and delighted the people.

But now he returns home to Nazareth. It's never easy going back to your home town – where people have watched you grow up and have already formed fixed views as to just who you are and what you're likely to achieve. Not quite my hometown – but I was asked to speak at my sister's church a couple of years ago – and my afterwards she said to me "I couldn't believe that was you. You were such a shy child... hiding whenever a man entered the room..." I wondered where she had been the last 40 or so years...!!

How would they hear what Jesus had to say? Jesus stood up to read in the synagogue which no doubt he had done many times over the years. They all knew him and some were related to him. This time he chose to read words from the prophet Isaiah which all the congregation would have known spoke of the coming Messiah – the one they longed for.

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

I wonder was it the way he said it, the conviction in his voice that caused them all to fix their eyes on him? What new insight could their relative and peer Jesus bring to this passage?

I doubt if any of them could have anticipated his next words - "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." That was tantamount to blasphemy!

Jesus then went on further to illustrate how God's message of liberation and love for the poor, oppressed, prisoners and blind reached beyond the Jews – but surely that could never be! How sad and introverted they were. They were so bound by their own prejudices and expectations that they failed to see the liberating and loving God standing right there in their midst.

But I have to question myself as to whether I've become too content with my status in life, too middle-class, too prejudiced, to really take on board and live the mission that Jesus declared.

But then - did even Jesus actually fulfil it?

He certainly preached good news to the poor – he taught the crowds, he fed them. Did he proclaim freedom for the prisoners? Well he definitely liberated those bound particularly by what was described as demon possession. He restored the sight of the blind. He released the oppressed – women, widows, prostitutes, tax collectors - showing love, care, acceptance and deliverance. Jesus never left people on the margins – he included them.

The year of the Lord's favour resembled the Jubilee year when every 50, in theory, all debts were wiped out. Everyone could start afresh. It was a season of mercy, forgiveness and restoration. Jesus clearly demonstrated this in his everyday dealings with people and comprehensively fulfilled it through his death on the cross enabling all to be forgiven and have access to God.

But that was 2000 years ago. What about now? Hasn't God ignored us since the time of Jesus? That was the question someone put to me on Friday. I knew the answer – in theory – but even as I said it – I wasn't totally convinced that the answer I was giving was going to be recognised as true. He's left the church – as his body on earth – to demonstrate his love and all that Jesus came to do.

After World War II some German students volunteered to help rebuild an English cathedral that had been badly damaged by the German bombings. Their restoration included a large statue of Jesus with arms outstretched and the familiar inscription, "Come unto Me." But there was no way they could repair the hands of Jesus as these had been completely destroyed. What should they do? After some discussion they decided to leave the hands off but change the inscription to words from St. Teresa of Avila: "Christ has no hands but ours."

The church is the body of Christ; it's not an individual thing it's a collective being – of individuals bound together in love in Christ demonstrating love – to God, to one another and especially to the poor and marginalised. But in reality we so often don't even get it right towards one and it's as if the church is suffering from an autoimmune disease and not even mistakenly attacking its own body. Even within the church there is backbiting, criticism and even isolation.

We're coming to the end of the week of prayer for Christian unity where we've met together with Christians from other churches. We've talked together particularly on identifying the marginalised and climate issues; we prayed together – but we must never think that that is sufficient to fulfil what Christ has called us to be and do. More often than not we need to be the answer to our prayers and start truly living out our faith.

Perhaps we've slipped into a state of apathy and contentment – after all we live in one of the top 10 global economies. Shockingly, and these are last year's figures around 14.2 million people live in poverty in the UK where poverty is defined as how much you need 'in order to have the opportunities and choices necessary to participate in society': that's 8.5 million adults, 4.5 million children and 1.4 million pensioners. 1 in every 5 and they are more likely to have disabilities, be renting and this is despite over half having one householder working.

Could we – as the church – Christ's body on earth - be doing more? Often we're paralysed from action because we don't know where or how to start getting involved. It feels beyond us and in any case others are much more skilled in this area. What can I do?

Our New Testament reading was from Paul's letter to the young church at Corinth. The church no doubt mirrored Corinth at that time – full of diversity - Romans, Greeks, mystics, Egyptians and Jews and every class of society; some exceptionally wealthy, many seeking to better themselves and make a name for themselves; traders but also refugees and probably a high proportion of slaves. As the "church" they were united in Christ – part of the one body of Christ. But sadly they held on to their divisions and status.

To help them understand just how destructive this was Paul took the body illustration one step further by giving each part a voice.

For those who felt themselves so inadequate and unable to offer anything Paul imagines the foot saying "Because I'm not a hand, I don't belong to the body," or the ear saying "Because I'm not an eye, I don't belong to the body". We laugh – we know that's ridiculous - a body can't just be eyes and hands!!

But there were also those who were too self-opinionated – who thought they could do everything themselves and didn't let others in thereby despising and degrading them. So back to the talking body parts – is there any situation where the eyes and head could say to another part – we don't need you! No way! In fact it's the lesser seen parts that we're totally dependent on and the despised parts which are so crucial.

A healthy body has every part fully functioning. It's dynamic and living-giving – a true representation of God himself. If we want to fulfil Jesus' mission on earth we need to be doing it together – united in love –

each with our own unique and valued role. I've always loved the word synergy – maybe that's the chemist in me – it's the combination of two things which together produce something greater than the sum of their separate contributions. Definitely better together. And when you add that extra dynamic of God's Holy Spirit within us – surely nothing is going to stop us – and then the world, particularly the poor and marginalised, will see God, the loving and liberating God, at work! The question is – are we willing to play our part?

Prayer: Father God we thank you that through Jesus we have received forgiveness, hope and love. May we, together as your body on earth, demonstrate and share this message freely with others and particularly bring your love to those who feel marginalised and neglected. Amen

E. Blackmore