**Luke 4:16-24**

**The church: inclusion for all**

The reading that we’ve had from the Gospel today is a really important because it is the first moment in Jesus’ public ministry. He has just come out of the desert after 40 days of trial and temptation and now, for the first time, he is about to go public: to launch his ministry. And so that being the case, we would expect Jesus to begin his ministry by announcing his manifesto: by outlining the core values of all that he stands for and what he wants to achieve.

So this is a hugely important passage because it outlines for us the core values of the Kingdom of God, the core values of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, the core values of what it means to be church here at St. Andrew’s.

As this story starts, Jesus has come to the synagogue, as was his Jewish tradition, and it was usual practice for someone known as a ‘darshanim’ to give a reading from the scriptures and speak about them; preach a sermon. The ‘darshanim’ could be anybody in the local community: he didn’t have to be a priest or a religious leader but someone from the community who wanted to say something about a particular passage of scripture.

So Jesus stands up and comes to the front of the synagogue and it becomes clear to everywone there that he is today’s ‘darshanim’. So the people settle down to hear what passage he has chosen and what he wants to say about it.

And Jesus picks a really well known passage from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

He then rolls us the scroll, and hands it back to the attendant.

The synagogue falls silent.

Everyone now waits to hear what he has to say about this well-known passage from Isaiah.

To be honest, expectations probably weren’t that high: this was just an ordinary Sabbath day service, the same as always, and probably in the same way that you may not expect a Sunday sermon to utterly transform your world, the people in the synagogue weren’t expecting anything particularly transformative.

What were they expecting? Well, they were living under Roman occupation of course, so probably they were expecting some message of hope for the future. Maybe Jesus would say: “We wait for this glorious day to come when God will set us free”. Maybe Jesus would say, “We need to hold on to this promise in Isaiah, because one day it will happen!”

But he doesn’t say that.

Instead, he makes this incredible claim: “This passage of scripture has come true today, as you heard it being read.”

What a bizarre thing to say! How plainly ridiculous! Hasn’t Jesus read the newspapers? The Romans are occupying our land. Palestine is not a free area. They are living in a society of inequality. Palestine is a land where political prisoners are mistreated. Palestine, the land of Israel, is a place where there is violence and terrorism and hatred. There is suffering and anxiety – a lack of peace. So how can Jesus stand there and say that this message of hope, this message of deliverance has come true in that moment?

How can Jesus say that the time of God’s liberation is today? Not tomorrow. But today.

The people were so angry with him that we read in verse 29 they rose up from the synagogue and tried to throw him off a cliff. The very first day of Jesus’ ministry started the way it ended three years later, with an attempt to silence him by killing him.

But Jesus was utterly unapologetic: “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Today.

What on earth are we to make of this?

I think it’s true to say that churches are very often not good at living in Today: we don’t do ‘The Present Moment’ very well. It seems to me that, too often, churches are consumed with either memories of the past: how wonderful things used to be or hopes for the future: how amazing things can be.

Memories of the past are enshrined around us, of course: we worship in an ancient building, we have memorial plaques to the dead filling our walls, we are led in worship by people wearing clothes designed hundreds of years ago, we say liturgies that were written many years ago, we sing hymns that are often hundreds of years old, we sit on pews that are from the 19th-century. And, of course, we bring with us our own memories of ‘how church used to be’ - and perhaps there may be an element of personal nostalgia in that.

Or perhaps we have our focus almost totally on the future: we have a vision for what St. Andrew’s can be in 10 years time and we are focused on the strategy for making that a reality and so we are always looking beyond what we are currently achieving to see what’s next, how we can continue to build, build, build.

It is a common thing for all churches: nostalgia for the past and hopes for the future impact on our ability to live in the present moment.

But as Jesus launches the manifesto for his ministry, he calls us definitively into the present moment: “Today, this is fulfilled…”

The Kingdom of God exists here, today, now…

This is God’s moment…

But why don’t we want to embrace the moment? Why don’t we want to be here now?

Fundamentally, it’s because ‘today’ is a dangerous and uncomfortable place to be. It is far easier to look back to days gone by and say how much better it all was then. It is far easier to look to the future and dream great dreams of how things might be. But to be here now is a scary prospect: because we are slam bang in the middle of God’s drama. We are here in the moment with God and God wants something from us right now, this minute.

Not yesterday. Not tomorrow. But today.

God wants to meet with you right here, right now – and that is a scary thought, isn’t it? We can get lost in nostalgia for the past and we can dream about the future - but we can’t escape the here and the now.

And this is where God is.

In the first statement of Jesus public ministry, he is calling us away from nostalgia for the past, he is calling us away from dreams for the future as the basis of our faith, and encouraging us to live in the moment, live in ‘Today’ with God. He wants us to open our eyes – and be here now…

And if we do that, as individuals and as a church – if we live in this moment right now - what do we have? We have God and we have one another - and the only response, the only positive response in this moment, has to be love.

If we are nostalgic for the past, we regret what exists in the here and now as not being good enough. If we are just dreaming about the future, we can become impatient with what exists in the here and now as not being developed enough. But the here and now is all we have. God is all we have. One another is all we have. And so we are to love and show kindness and compassion: because that is all that can exist ‘in the moment’.

And as we continually seek to live in the moment, so we will become a more welcoming and inclusive church.

We welcome Emma and Chloe here and now into our family. We welcome those with Additional Needs and we rejoice in what they bring to our church family: their gifts, their talents, their example of unconditional love to us. And as we welcome people in, as we seek to become a fully inclusive church. We recognise that we do so from a position of weakness, not strength and that we need to learn and receive more from those we welcome than we are ever able to offer back. Weakness and vulnerability are at the heart of the Christian Gospel: that is what the message of Christ crucified is all about. Weakness and vulnerability are at the heart of the Christian Gospel: which is why God says through Paul in 2 Corinthians, “My power is made perfect in weakness”. Weakness and vulnerability are at the heart of the Christian Gospel: because weakness and vulnerability are, in and of themselves, perfection.

Let me give you an example of this, that you may or may not agree with…

When it comes to people with disabilities – physical or mental – we think of them as being less than they were created to be in body or mind. Even the very word ‘disability’ speaks of that situation as being something less than perfection. But what if we were to turn on its head our idea of what is perfect, or even what is ‘normal’ and question whether or not the view that wider society has of physical perfection may not actually be true? What if physical or mental disability is no less perfect and ‘normal’ than what most of us experience - but it is just different, that’s all?

I have puzzled for years over this part of our Gospel passage this morning, verse 23: Jesus says, “I am sure that you will quote this proverb to me, ‘Doctor, heal yourself’…

Now, that makes no sense to me whatsoever unless Jesus had a physical disability. That makes no sense to me unless people could look at Jesus’ physical body and think, “Well, he says he can heal other people – so why doesn’t he heal himself?” Could it be that Jesus was physically disabled in a very obvious way?

We may want to say, “No, of course he wasn’t – because Jesus was perfect…” But what we are doing is allowing our definition of perfection to exclude those who have physical disability; that the physically disabled are somehow less than perfect. But what if Jesus was perfect – and Jesus was disabled? Doesn’t that completely turn on its head our understanding of what perfection is? And if it does, doesn’t it deeply challenge us about how we are to be an inclusive church, and what it means for us to be welcoming and accessible for all people, regardless of ability or disability or age or mental health or circumstance?

The potential for a perfect, disabled Jesus deeply challenges how we are as Church…

And that, of course, is why Damian’s appointment as Additional Needs Champion is such a hugely important appointment for us at St. Andrew’s because we do need to be constantly reminded and challenged about what it means for us to be a wholly inclusive church. We pray for Damian and we support his ministry, and we want to constantly grow as a church that is loving and kind and inclusive and hospitable to all.

On the first day of his public ministry, Jesus said this: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

Jesus said, “This passage of scripture has come true today.”

How can we make that passage of Scripture come true for us today here at St. Andrew’s? What does it mean for us to be a church where we offer good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom from oppression?

That is God’s promise to us through Jesus. But living in God’s promise is not about wallowing in nostalgia for yesterday any more than it is about getting locked into dreaming big dreams for tomorrow. Living in God’s promise is about how we are as a church right here, right now. The way in which we show love to one another. The way in which we show kindness and love and compassion. The way in which we are inclusive and hospitable to all.

“This passage of scripture has come true today”

It’s up to us to live that out. Right here. Right now.