

The spirit of the Lord is upon me

Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, 8–10; Psalm 19; Corinthians 12:12–31; Luke 4:14–21

Having had a little detour into John's gospel last week, we return to the opening chapters of Luke. Jesus has been baptised by John the Baptist, and has spent 40 days in the wilderness preparing for his ministry and calling. He has now returned to Nazareth where he is asked, as any Jewish male could be, to read in the synagogue. He is handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and he unrolls it to a particular place and begins to read.

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. (Luke 4:14-21)

Jesus then publically claims these words as his mission, he is the one who will bring them to fulfilment.

Isaiah's prophecy presents a vision in which imprisonment, oppression and enslavement are rendered powerless by the Messiah.

This vision of the kingdom of God has deep spiritual implications for humanity, but also powerful socio-political implications for freedom, justice, life and hope.

For the Jews listening to Jesus perhaps these words signified hope in the midst a sacrificial system of Law that had become distorted and corrupted by those with vested interests in power. Perhaps some heard only a threat or challenge to their own position. The text tells us that many were amazed by Jesus, and maybe some on that day, heard and saw in him a vision of a different social order – one where the poor were not forgotten and injustice would be overturned. Could this be the Messiah promised by God?

If we take the words Jesus claimed for himself and bring them into our own time and place, they are just as powerful in the hope and vision they offer. Spiritually we can become enslaved or imprisoned by any number of things: a

particular work ethic, a destructive pattern of relationships, jealousy, anger, the lust for power, fear, unhealed pain or issues that remain unresolved.

I am deeply concerned about the insidious power of our consumer culture which woos or courts the baser desires of our human nature, such as fear, greed and pride. Such a culture has the power to drown out the spirit, to silence the soul, and before we know it we find ourselves living in a constant state of discontent and emptiness, despite the fact that we have a higher standard of living than most people around the world. Without realising it we become imprisoned by a particular lifestyle and it takes great courage, strength and resolve to break out of this prison and discover a way of life that brings healing, freedom and hope.

Of course our spiritual health has a powerful impact upon our relationships with others. If we are enslaved by consumerism, then we will either directly or indirectly be involved in the oppression of the poor. If we are held prisoner by our anger and rage, we will act violently, unjustly and abusively towards others. If we have allowed ourselves to become enslaved to our desires and concerns then we are less likely to speak out against injustice, corruption and inequality in our social systems.

And so Jesus comes bringing salvation for the whole person – body, mind and soul, that all people might be saved.

If we look at Jesus ministry we see him healing physical ailments and deformities as well as performing exorcisms. We see him feeding the hungry crowds with bread and fish, as well as feeding hungry souls with living water and the bread of life. We see him restoring relationships through forgiveness, generosity and hospitality, as well as challenging the rich and powerful and those who sought their own glory over the needs of others.

The values of the Kingdom of God turn the values of the world upside down. This is not a kingdom based on power and domination, oppression or control. It is not a kingdom driven by the economy, tax havens, multinational corporations or the power of celebrity. In the kingdom of God power and life are found, not in vested interests, but in sacrifice and service.

It would stand to reason therefore, that those who choose to live the values of the kingdom of God would live a counter-cultural life – one that challenges the status quo and questions popular opinion, one that offers new possibilities and experiences of abundance, freedom and joy.

Is this how we are living our lives as Christians in the world and as a community of Christ, or are we still, in many ways, enslaved by the dominant culture? This is the real challenge for us, and perhaps through Lent we can focus upon this in our personal reflections.

It is God's intention that his people will be a light to the nations, and therefore, the kingdom of God must be evident in the way we live, in our relationships, and in the choices we make.

Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, expends much energy and passion in encouraging them to live in such a way, that their life together as a community of Christ, is a witness to the values of the kingdom of God.

In the reading from Corinthians today, Paul talks about how each has special gifts to offer to our common life and each member of the community is to be honoured and highly valued. There is no place in the kingdom of God for divisions based on human ideas of worthiness, there is no place for status, special privileges or the shunning of individuals or groups. No member of the community of Christ can say to another: *I have no need of you.* (1 Cor 12:21)

As a community of Christ we are called to deeper lives, and higher relationships with each other. Sometimes we come pretty close, and we experience something of the true joy, peace and healing we have in Christ.

Sometimes though we really struggle don't we? We struggle with those people we find difficult or demanding, we disagree with each other, we misunderstand one another. We let each other down, and grieve the Spirit of God through a lack of trust, a lack of grace, a reluctance to deal with issues appropriately before they become deep divisions.

We really do know what Paul means when he says: *If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.* (1 Cor. 12:26)

We need to return constantly to the vision of the kingdom that Jesus puts before us and claims as his own. These are words of healing and life and a reminder that, in Christ, we have salvation of our whole person -body, mind and spirit; and we therefore have salvation and freedom in our relationships.

Jesus promises that in him we can live well and abundantly in the world without being enslaved by it, and that we can live a rich, full and joyful life with each other.

We are called to live as witnesses to the Gospel of Life.

May Christ strengthen, uphold and bless us as we seek to follow him, and may we bring the Word of Life into everything we do and say in the world.

The Lord be with you.