

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 24 January 2016
A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman
Epiphany 3C
Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10; 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a; Luke 4: 14-21

"The Spirit of our God is upon me, because the Most High has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God 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 our God's favour."

These words, ascribed by the writer of Luke's gospel to Jesus in the tiny synagogue in Nazareth, are for me the heart of the gospel. They tell us who Jesus is. How he understood himself. By implication they tell us who we are to be as Christians and as the church. They tell me that compassionate justice is what we are called to - and they tell me that the church, our church, is to be the beloved community that nurtures this way of being human and this task of transforming the world.

In these words, Jesus sings Isaiah's song of good news for the poor, in the key of his mother Mary of Nazareth. Mary's song in the Magnificat, from the Gospel's first chapter, still rings in our ears, and in our hearts.

No wonder all eyes were fixed on Jesus when he finished reading. In choosing this passage from Isaiah, he announces the year of the Jubilee! The all bets are off, all debts forgiven, slaves freed, land redeemed, year that is described in Leviticus 25.

Life totally different to the life we know, which is why scholars have their doubts about whether the jubilee was ever actually observed.

But then, scripture is more about hope than it is about history. Proclaiming peace where there is no peace, the inversion of unjust power hierarchies while they are firmly in place, singing freedom while we are in chains, is the beginning of imagining a new reality into being. The proclamation of liberty precedes its birth.

Every day that I arrive at Pitt Street, I see the banner above the door, announcing that the children must be freed from detention. I am reminded that we must not rest until it is so. My comfort is disturbed by that sign, knowing that I will do my everyday tasks for the congregation while injustice continues to be done in our name.

But without the hope that liberation will one day come, we would do nothing. There would be little reason to be the church.

I've read and heard this passage hundreds of times and always I hear it in the context of my life in Christian community. Today I hear it, knowing that after church today we will be having a conversation about our dreams and visions, and our hopes together for our life in 2016.

A couple of weeks ago, when I realised that this would be the gospel passage for the day of our conversation, I was delighted. For it calls us to be a community of radical actors for

social transformation. It calls us away from small understandings of mission and church life to the grand challenge of faith. The challenge to change the world.

But, as often happens, my reflection on scripture doesn't always go in the direction I expected it would. And this week I have found myself thinking about Spirit as much as about justice. The content of the call is undoubtedly crucial. We are called to bring good news to people living in poverty, to individuals who are imprisoned and to families in detention; to people who are disabled, to all who are oppressed.

But this passage first asks us to first take a breath, to consider the Spirit who is upon us, anointing us to carry out this mission. It invites us to attend to the specific gifts and vocations to which we as a church, and as individuals, are called and anointed.

This passage about the Spirit being with Jesus, reminds us of a later passage, written by the same author in Acts, which tells us that Jesus spoke to his disciples, instructing them to wait for the Spirit. In Acts 1:8, he said to them: "*You will receive power when the Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses... to the ends of the earth.*"

We could enter a conversation about our dreams and visions for our mission as a church - depending only on ourselves, on our brains and abilities and willingness to work hard. But this passage reminds us that we are to start with Spirit. What we are doing together is up to us, but it is not only up to us. And that's a really good thing because the ministries to which we are called require more wisdom, strength and talent than we possess on our own.

This passage which follows the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness for forty days tell us that he returned from that time "*filled with the Spirit.*" So why do we, so often, attempt to live as Christians, attempt to be the church, without seeking the guidance, gifts and strength that the Holy Spirit brings? What wilderness in our hearts must we engage so that we might emerge filled with the Spirit's power?

It is also easy to miss the communal aspects of the call. The call that Jesus embraced was not a solitary mission, but the task of whole communities and ultimately of the whole church throughout time and throughout the world.

As a church we will find our call as we continue the ministry of Jesus, drawing on the gifts of our members. None of us has all of the gifts. No one individual or congregation has the responsibility to do all of the ministry, or every kind of ministry, to which the worldwide church is called in Jesus' name.

It is the task of each church, at different times in its life, to seek out its particular callings, sometimes leaving behind ministries that thrived in years gone by but which are now lacking in Spirit energy.

If we trust the Spirit and see ourselves as part of a larger community, the next step is to make concrete the callings to justice and healing that sound so good in the abstract. What will this look like, worked out here among us at Pitt Street, in the years that lie ahead of us?

Jesus' inaugural address is about the politics of compassion, and he tells us to "*Be compassionate as God your Father/Mother is compassionate*". Marcus Borg says that's the better translation of Luke 6:36, not "*be merciful*", but "*be compassionate*".

As Borg says, *“in an age of excessive individualism, we would rather talk about each one of us doing our thing to better the world, rather than the idea of the community re-shaping itself, reordering its priorities, changing the system and transforming relationships, whatever it takes, to meet the needs of all of God's children and to extend a compassionate response to the suffering of the world. Mercy may suggest one person bending down to someone in need, but compassion - that means feeling with another, not from above, but from right alongside.”* (From *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*).

So, as a community filled with the Spirit's power, let us ask again: Who are the poor around us and among us? Who might we partner with to bring good news to the poor in our community and our city?

The question of sight to the blind reminds us to think of how we make the world inclusive or exclusive of people with disabilities. How might we enable full participation in our common life for people who are often excluded, not by their disability, but by the physical and cultural barriers we place before them?

How will we work out bringing liberty to the oppressed? How will we resist the aspects of our culture that limit people's full humanity on the basis of their gender or sexual orientation? Will we stand up against apologists for domestic violence like Mark Latham, blaming feminism and claiming that men's violence against intimate partners is a coping mechanism for low self-esteem?

Specifically, how will we join the struggle for marriage equality so that no one else will have to endure seeing a death certificate which says their beloved spouse was never married, as happened this week to a British man visiting South Australia when his husband died in a tragic accident on their honeymoon. This man was denied rights as next of kin to make decisions about organ donation and arrangements for the funeral.

The call to us includes, in the Spirit's power, release of the captives. What will be do, this year, to release people, adults and children, from the prisons of Nauru, Manus and Christmas Island and the mainland detention centres?

The over-representation of Indigenous Australians in prison is one of the most urgent human rights issues facing our country today. Nationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults are 15 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous Australians and the situation, the statistics, are getting worse not better. The rates for child incarceration are completely scandalous: 24 times higher than for non-indigenous children across Australia, and 52 times higher in WA.

How will we resist this and the ongoing deaths in detention of indigenous Australians for which no-one is held accountable?

Thinking about poverty, disability, imprisonment and oppression can easily lead us to hopelessness. We despair of the endless talk and hand wringing and so often we place the hard work of liberation into a place that is out of sight and out of mind.

Jesus' inaugural sermon was bold in what he laid out before his hearers, but his words and actions truly made a difference in human lives. This is what Incarnation is – the Word become flesh: a community of welcome, reconciliation and sharing – that respects human dignity of poor people, of abused people, of queer people, of foreigners, of children – of everyone!

We too, by the power of the spirit, are called to incarnate the Word, each in our own way, individually and together.

Hearing this passage again today reminds us that the unity of ethics and spiritual formation are both important things that we need to be on about, as community. Yes, ethics is about doing the right thing? But spiritual formation is about what nurtures us and empowers us and encourages us to keep going on this journey – to live out what we believe about the interconnectedness of all life. It is about Spirit just as much as it is about justice.

Paul's image of the body in First Corinthians 12 reminds us that we live into the vision of Isaiah and Jesus and Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King Jr as people in relation. Our gifts are communal as well as individual.

In his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, African American theologian and civil rights activist, Howard Thurman noted that one of the greatest ills of poverty and injustice is the stifling of the imagination and dreams of the oppressed.

A holistic ethic will nurture the deep yearnings of those around us, especially the marginalized. Whatever diminishes one member of the community eventually diminishes us all. In a relational universe, our joys and sorrows are one; we rejoice in the authentic achievements of those around us and mourn their pain and inability to live out their destiny.

Jesus affirms a good news ethic. God is liberating, healing, welcoming, and awakening. This is God's work now in our world, Jesus asserts, and we need to be part of this Shalom-affirming mission of God. God's Spirit is with us, brings freedom, creativity, and beauty to the universe.

Alignment with the signs of the Spirit's work is our calling today. In a relational universe, this is the fulfilment of God's law that Nehemiah's people heard again when they returned from the Exile. And it was a reason to rejoice. To celebrate. To love life in the midst of the challenges.

Telling out such good news, such peace, such liberating work of the Spirit, remains the core activity of the Christa community.

This is our call, too, as "evangelists" who preach the good news, and speak the words of new life:

The Spirit of the Most High is upon us, and we too are anointed to bring good news to the world that God loves so much.

May God bless our journey in Spirit and in justice.