

## THE BOUNTY OF GOD'S DELIVERANCE

Nehemiah 8. 1-3, 5-6, 8-10

1 Corinthians 12. 12-31a

Luke 4. 14-21

I speak to you in the name of ✠ the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

St Luke's gospel constantly speaks of the role of the Holy Spirit in our Lord's life and ministry. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. He grew up and matured in the Holy Spirit. The Spirit descended upon him in the bodily form of a dove at his baptism in the Jordan River. The same Holy Spirit led Christ into the wilderness to be tempted forty days by the devil. Then our Lord returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, where he taught week by week in the synagogues; and his fame spread throughout the whole region.

Today, led by the same Spirit, Jesus goes to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as he had the habit of doing, Christ went into the local synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read. He was given the book of the prophet Isaiah. Our Lord then opened the scroll and chose what we now call chapter 61, verses 1 and 2:<sup>1 2</sup> 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me<sup>3</sup> 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.'

These powerful words are part of the prophet Isaiah's depiction of the one true Servant of the Lord, the Anointed One or the Messiah. What then happens on the scene in the synagogue is highly dramatic, to say the least. Jesus rolls up the scroll,

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<sup>1</sup> St Jerome, the greatest biblical scholar of the early Church, gave chapter and verse numbers to his Latin translation, called The Vulgate. His numbering is still used today.

<sup>2</sup> Lk 4. 18-19 brings together in modified form verses from the Septuagint (LXX) version of Isa 61. 1 and 58. 6.

<sup>3</sup> A reference to Jesus's baptism (cf. Lk 3. 3).

gives it to the attendant,<sup>4</sup> and sits down. In choosing to sit, Christ acts just as rabbis would have done; they sat in order to teach and to exposit texts of Scripture.<sup>5</sup> We are told that ‘the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him’. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’.

With this one phrase, our Lord identifies himself with the Anointed Servant prophesied of old. He could have said, ‘I am the Messiah’; or ‘I am the Christ’. But the oblique way in which he speaks increases the tension by giving his hearers time and space to think.

In reading this passage from Isaiah, Jesus speaks of various types of liberation. Yes, his work and teachings will be good news to the poor; yes, his ministry will release people from various forms of bondage and oppression, be they economic, physical, political or demonic; and indeed, his forgiveness of sins can be seen as a form of release from bondage to iniquity. And when Christ will restore sight to the blind (Lk 7. 21-22, 18. 35), he will do so not only physically; he will also figuratively fulfil God’s work of salvation and fulfil the role of the one destined to be a light for the nations (Lk 2. 32).

In reading the text from Isaiah, our Lord announces finally that he is the one who has come to ‘proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour’. Those in the synagogue who heard these words would have immediately thought of the Year of Jubilee, as described in the Old Testament book of Leviticus.<sup>6</sup> Following a period of forty-nine years (seven periods of seven years each), the fiftieth year was to be a time for liberation, a year when slaves would be freed and all Israelites would return to their ancestral land. For the Jews who listened to Jesus as he spoke, the Jubilee Year

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<sup>4</sup> The assistant was called a ‘Hazzan’.

<sup>5</sup> Presumably Jesus was able to read the scriptures in Hebrew and then interpret them in Aramaic, as would have been customary. The practice of giving a translation and exposition can be traced to Neh 8.8, which is one of the appointed readings for today.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Lev 25. 8-55.

signified a year of restoration; and Christ used this same phrase to refer to the coming of the kingdom of God. Our Lord's ministry signalled that the time for the liberation of the impoverished and the oppressed had come; and his work would indeed fulfil the ideal and social concerns of the Jubilee Year.

But the liberation of which Jesus speaks is more than a political, medical, economic, or human rights programme. This is liberation to the utmost degree, even from the jaws of death and hell. Christ, the Anointed Servant of the Lord, lived the sinless and righteous life from which we, all humankind, have gone astray. Yet this same Anointed Servant suffered undeserved hatred and unjust rejection; this servant of God was called a blasphemer; and this fulfiller of virtue and justice was punished like a criminal, to the point of death on a cross.

It is precisely in this suffering that the Anointed Servant accomplished his mission. In the words of St Paul, 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Cor 5. 21). The liberation of which our Lord speaks is in fact *redemption*. It is an exchange: Jesus takes on our sin, and he gives us his goodness.

The fact that Christ chose to read this particular passage of Isaiah in the synagogue is significant. Indeed, its importance can scarcely be exaggerated. For St Luke, this text proclaimed the fulfilment of scripture and the fulfilment of the hopes of Israel, through our Lord's ministry as the Son of God. This text stated the social concern that would guide Jesus's work; and it allowed Luke's readers and hearers to understand that all of Christ's work would be the fulfilment of his anointing by the Holy Spirit.

What our Lord understood by these verses, however, differed sharply from what those gathered in the synagogue assumed that they meant. For Jesus, these verses

pointed to nothing less than salvation, in the broadest and most liberating sense; and they pointed to the salvation offered by God *to all people*.

In Christ's hometown, the people read the scriptures as promises of God's exclusive covenant with them, a covenant that involved promises of deliverance from their oppressors. Our Lord came announcing deliverance, but it was not a national deliverance. It was God's promise of liberation for all, regardless of nationality, gender, race, social status, religious background or religious tradition.

When the radical inclusiveness of Jesus's announcement became clear to those gathered in the synagogue in Nazareth, their commitment to their own community boundaries took precedence over their joy that God had sent a prophet among them. The next section of Luke 4 (which sadly is not included in our reading for today) tells us that those in the synagogue became filled with rage; and they chased our Lord out of town, hoping to hurl him off a cliff. In the end, because they were not open to the prospect of others sharing in the bounty of God's deliverance, they themselves were unable to receive it.

May God enable us at St Stephen's *not* to imitate those who found themselves in the synagogue in Nazareth that day. May we be open, gracious and welcoming to all who come through our doors; and may we point them to the glorious and life-changing truth of the gospel we proclaim.

Jesus says, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.' 'Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear!'<sup>7</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Mt 11. 15 and 13. 9.