

Jesus' challenge to the home crowd

30 January 2022

High Street Uniting Church Frankston

David Fotheringham

Read: Luke 4:14-30

Holy God, your word can be like a sword to us. Grant that when you pierce our hearts you would also draw us to your healing of mercy and grace, with all of your people. Amen.

Last night we had Ash Barty playing before a home crowd – an Australian crowd, proud to call her one of ours. And it was a great win!

By the sounds of it, Jesus' return to the synagogue in Nazareth was also rather like the favoured son returning to a home crowd. He'd had some wins in other synagogues a bit further afield, so the home crowd are eager for his home performance.

Luke uses this story to set the scene for all of Jesus' subsequent ministry, with Jesus' quote from Isaiah and his very short sermon: "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing".

But setting the scene like this is a truly double-edged sword. If it isn't the hardest passage for anyone to preach on, it ought to be. Because Jesus is at first charming and inspiring and exciting. He preaches with authority, and his preaching lifts the mood of those who listen. This is all great.

But the problem is – and I can assure you that this is just as much a problem for any preacher dealing with a passage like this – the problem is that Jesus does not just say the good and hope-filled words and then smile for the photo-opportunity with the leader at the door.

The people had been saying just how great he was - Joseph's son, doing them proud (and especially after all of those doubts about the legitimacy of his birth!) (He was a survivor!) But Jesus is virtually rude. I'm not sure that I can figure out what tone of voice Jesus was using for these words, but despite his home-town's very appreciative reception of him he says "no prophet is accepted in their home-town".

If I was there I think I'd be feeling confused at that point. And then he goes further.

The best that I can understand it is that what happened is something like this.

Jesus has just finished quoting from Isaiah. The words are lovely, but maybe they're not supposed to be abstract.

Jesus' quote from Isaiah began with 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.' Which would get you to prick up your ears if you are poor. And if you are part of the church, anointed by the Holy Spirit from the very first Pentecost, hearing these words is a reminder of a very real focus of mission. The Spirit has anointed us to bring good news to the poor.

Jesus continued the quote: the Spirit's anointing is also directed towards proclaiming release to the captives. In a world where we surely can't help but be aware that there are recognised refugees and other seekers of asylum who are even now being kept in years-long detention in the Park Hotel awaiting medical treatment and a place to live, what is the church anointed to do?

Jesus goes on to recovery of sight for the blind, which to me leads to thinking about the blinkers that keep us safe from seeing too much of this.

Jesus' quote had finished with: letting the oppressed go free, and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour...

... and those in the synagogue were perhaps all too ready to hear the news of their own freedom. Maybe that's why they were so proud of their preacher who told them such positive and hope-filled things.

But to my dismay and yours, he didn't just stop there and smile.

Because he was actually going to do something about it. The smiling and nodding of the prophet's hometown can belie their engagement with those issues.

According to the Red Cross, the greatest number of refugees in the world are from Syria. Which is sadly unsurprising. I am not sure if any of the refugees in the Park Hotel, or among the just over 100 in each of PNG and Nauru, are from Syria, but when Jesus goes further with his remarks he comments that in the time of Elisha God's help was for a Syrian. And in the famine in the time of Elijah God's help was for the Lebanese widow.

Those in the synagogue listening to Jesus were scandalised. Why wouldn't they be? They were neither Syrian nor Lebanese.

Where does that leave us?

Let me suggest three things.

First of all, this is a call to attention. As we listen to Jesus in the gospel of Luke this year, we can expect to be challenged. Jesus' encounters with people are filled with grace and healing and compassion but they challenge the status quo. Jesus means to challenge the status quo. And he does. Maybe we should too.

Second of all, this is a call to hope. The Jesus we meet here will love, and heal, and embrace, all those who are last and least. This Jesus will love, and heal and embrace us too, in our greatest vulnerability and need.

Third of all, this is a call to follow. Jesus' anointing by the Holy Spirit is not for no purpose. It is to be a proclaimer of good news, of release, of hope, and of embrace beyond our comfort zones. Luke's gospel tells the story of the Holy Spirit at work in Jesus' practical ministry and love, as the outworking of his being in relation with God. That same Holy Spirit is poured out upon the church to proclaim good news – to live it.

I'm sorry that I didn't plan to follow this sermon with the song "Inspired by love and anger" (look it up if you don't know it), but what we ARE going to sing is "Will you come and follow me".

Because in this passage we have Jesus in his hometown, calling us to attention, calling us to hope, and calling us to follow. But not pretending that it's a comfortable ride.

Will you come and follow me.