

Our Mission

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

It was these words from Isaiah that Jesus read at the beginning of his ministry and then announced to the synagogue that they had been fulfilled in their hearing. It is more than just a nice piece of poetry from 500 years before Christ, but a description, if you like a Messianic Manifesto that would describe the mission of Jesus and by implication it is a description of our mission, as individual Christians and also that for the church and the Diocese and our ministry units. It is almost as if we should inscribe them in stone and place them in the sanctuary. We should read them out at every service, and check our Council programmes against them.

So what are they:

- to bring good news to the oppressed,
- to bind up the broken-hearted,
- to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;
- to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God;
- to comfort all who mourn;
- to provide for those who mourn in Zion.

To bring, to bind up, to proclaim and to comfort. And to do this to those who are oppressed, who are broken hearted, who are captive and who mourn. Let us think in the beginning about the mission field. These are not those who are us. They are the outsiders. Christians come from people like this but only when we reach out past these four walls. Bishop Temple remarked that the church is the only organization that exists for the benefit of those who are not members. This should temper all that we do. It is not about attempting to browbeat them into some form of submission to our ideas, but building bridges to the outsider and making it easy for others to join us. This means an attitude of tolerance and attitude that puts aside what it is that we want so that others may benefit. Who are those outsiders that we want to invite in? They may be family, people who have come hesitantly for baptism, or the neighbour. Perhaps it will be someone who has a feeling inside that they ought to be in church at Christmas. We should not look at reaching out too far, for the most effective means is to use our natural networks. Who is it that we can see that is our mission field?

But finding these people is not enough. What are we expected to do? We are to evangelise – to bring the good news, but it is to those who are oppressed. All too often, we oppress with our evangelism. We target people and place on them, expectations of our own. Evangelism is not about confronting people but about showing them the liberty that comes through a relationship with God. It is a delicate thing, but it begins within us. We must ourselves find that liberty to give it to others. The oppressed, the captive, the prisoner, will need to learn from our freedom. This means that we ourselves must be free. It is so easy in religion to replace one set of oppression with another. This is what Jesus accused the Pharisees of doing. Faith is not about Laws or rules, it is about relationships. We must avoid the trap of trying to specify Christianity as a set of do's and don'ts.

This makes Christianity hard. For it is not possible for me to say, “if you do X, Y, and Z then you will be on the way to heaven”. Faith demands the development of a relationship between the individual and their God. Like all relationships, this is a developing thing, and so walking on the Journey with us will be those who are not so far along and those who are further along. This calls for tolerance in the sense that in the church we will always find those that are more pious or more worldly than we. We must avoid trying to make comparisons. Paul said, that all things are valid, but not all things are beneficial. Growth in faith is finding strength in things that are beneficial and cutting out the things that are not – these might be something like smoking, drinking etc.

Freedom that we proclaim is the freedom of a loving relationship where there are no expectations – no right thing to do, other than what is best for the other.

We are to proclaim the year of the Lord's Favour and his vengeance. We must never allow tolerance to cloud the message of the judgement that is to come. The worse thing we can do is to give people a false hope that it doesn't matter. Dietrich Bonhoeffer described this as cheap grace.

The third ministry described is to embrace the world's hurts. To comfort the mourner and to bind up the broken hearted. The presence of the church in the community is to be a healing force. Yes we will at times, need this ourselves as individuals we are not immune from the suffering of the world, but in our faith, we have the answer of a loving God reaching out. And Jesus who is the one not above our sufferings but walking with us in our sufferings.

This is the about meeting people where they are and to offer them what they need. It will be in the sharing of the journey with others that we proclaim the good news and draw others into the kingdom.

Let us not be afraid to take up the challenge of this mission. We are to:

- to bring good news to the oppressed,
- to bind up the broken-hearted,
- to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;
- to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God;
- to comfort all who mourn;
- to provide for those who mourn in Zion.

To bring, to bind up, to proclaim and to comfort those who are oppressed, who are broken hearted, who are captive and who mourn.

Let us recommit ourselves to this task.

AMEN