

Epiphany 4 – 27 January 2019
Chichester Cathedral
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Hometowns have a way of keeping us humble. No matter how professional or prestigious or successful we might think we are, our hometowns contain the people who remember that awkward phase when we would only wear the colour red and the year we remained in our Halloween costume well beyond the month of October. They remember our imaginary friends as a child, our clumsiness as a teenager, and all of our orthodontic work. Because they know us at our best and at our most awkward, hometowns keep us humble but they also don't want us to grow up too much and threaten the image they carry of us.

Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth in this morning's gospel and has to walk this precarious line. They remember him as the son of Mary and Joseph. They probably recall the story of that time he was lost for 5 days and was found teaching in the Temple. And while they've heard some stories that he's up-and-coming in the world of miracle work, they don't know that he's recently been declared at his baptism as "my Son" by God, nor that he's spent the last 40 days fasting and fending off the devil in the wilderness.

And so as they gather in the synagogue that day, we can imagine that they are a bit curious about this local boy returning from some travels. And whether they can sense that he is filled with the power of the Spirit or not, when he stands up and carefully unrolls the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, they listen:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," he reads "because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty 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."

And then he looks up, rolls up the scroll, sits down and says to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

If this were an academic paper, this sentence would be Luke's thesis statement. If this were a novel, it would be the key to the plot. If this were a church, it would be the vision statement. Because here in this season of Epiphany, this season of revelation, we have revealed to us who Jesus is and what he will do, not in the past or in the future, but today.

And I'm not sure we grasp the radical nature of this statement. Those gathered around Jesus in that synagogue would have known that this passage from Isaiah pointed to the long-awaited messiah, the "anointed one." For Jesus to claim that the Lord has anointed him to bring this good news, to proclaim this gospel, is thus impossible for them to fathom. They were waiting for a messiah to save and deliver them from oppression and darkness. And

there was absolutely no way that this hometown boy, looking rather skinny and just back from some travels, is the messiah that Isaiah describes.

At first, Luke tells us, of course they are amazed by what he has said. But then, as the reality of it sinks in, the story continues right after the gospel for this morning that they begin to doubt, they question his audacity, they realise they cannot accept the promises he proclaims, and they try to throw him off a cliff.

And we think – my goodness, that escalated quickly. Clearly there’s more to the gospel this morning than simply some good news for the poor and the oppressed that his hometown would want to kill him over his statement. And we wonder whether we need to feel threatened by the words of Jesus, as well?

Because at first glance, they don’t feel very threatening. And part of this is because if fulfil means that the things promised will happen, this seems a bit shallow. For captives – those in prison, those displaced from home and country, and those imprisoned by fear, despair, depression, sin – are not liberated. Those who live in darkness – be that of grief or addiction or loneliness or sightlessness – have not recovered. Those who are oppressed by regimes and racism and the numerous phobias in our world are not free. A poll in the papers this morning, on this Holocaust Memorial Day, saying that 1 in 20 Britons deny the Holocaust happened makes this abundantly clear. So while the promises of Jesus that all of these things will be fulfilled today sounds really nice, we can’t see how this could lead anyone to want to kill Jesus as it also seems to be an unfulfilled proclamation.

But what if it isn’t? What if this promise of Jesus is actually being fulfilled *today* and we are missing it? What if this promise of Jesus is being fulfilled today but like that crowd we aren’t sure we want to embrace it? What if we think that there *are* some who are not worthy of God’s favour? What if deep down we resent God’s favour being shown to those whom we discount or disdain?¹ What if we are so stuck in the way things used to be in the past or our fantasies about the future that we miss that God is at work in our lives now, today, with us?

Jesus reads from Scripture and the very first word of his public ministry in this gospel is “today”. The word “today” I would wager is the most profound part of the gospel this morning. That “today” this Scripture has been fulfilled doesn’t mean that it’s a once for all event, but rather the tense of the verb tells us that this is something that is ongoing, recurring over and over again. Today God’s promise is fulfilled and continues to be fulfilled and will keep being fulfilled, in your presence. It would be much more comfortable for us to read this passage as good news for those around Jesus, as teachings for a particular time and place with little demand on us who hear it this morning. But the fulfilment continues and the

¹ David Vryhof, SSJE, “Unwelcome Truths”.

challenge is for us not to leave Jesus' promises in the past, which of course is the easiest thing to do; the challenge is for us to continue the work of Jesus as members of his body.

Because the word "today" transforms the promises of Isaiah into a promise of God's presence today, a promise that God acts on behalf of those in need, that God takes the side of the vulnerable, that God's love extends well beyond the boundaries we set for it. The word "today" transforms the promises of Isaiah into an invitation to all those who hear these words to respond to God's promises today. For God has anointed us as members of Christ's body to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. God has anointed us today to bring good news, to carry the gospel, to our broken world. What if we added "today" to our mission and values and then lived like it was so? Because of course this is a place of transformation where we find meaning in God's unconditional love and compassion. But what if we said that this isn't just something that happens here, but that it happens here *today*. That *today*, you are being transformed. *Today* you are loved. *Today* you are being offered God's compassion.

Those gathered around Jesus in the gospel this morning refused to hear his message and respond to his good news, the good news that we know all too well will eventually lead to Jesus' death. But today this radical, dangerous promise of favour, release, freedom, love has been fulfilled in your hearing. And today, you are invited not only to receive the love and comfort offered by God, but to offer it to others. Today, you are invited in the words of St Paul to be the body of Christ because in the words of another great saint (Teresa of Avila), "Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours, yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world, yours are the feet with which he walks to do good, yours are the hands, with which he blesses us now." May it be so.

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