

Sermon 23 January 2022

Philippians 4:4-9 Luke 4:14-21

Jesus's ministry was just getting under way. He comes to Galilee from his time in the desert, where he fasted in preparation for his ministry and where he underwent a time of temptation from the devil himself. Luke tells us that he travelled around the country teaching in the synagogues.

The synagogue was the real centre of religious life in Palestine. Just as in Christian countries, you will find a church in every town and village, so it was with synagogues. Teaching was an important part of the worship, and so here we have Jesus doing just that. He quotes from a passage from Isaiah, and then comes out with that rather mind-blowing statement, *'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'*

The people were both amazed that someone from their midst could speak with such wisdom, and also very angry that he was making this claim. A few verses later recount how the people attempted to push him off the edge of a cliff. Today I want to focus on that Isaiah passage itself, and I want to focus on two aspects.

Firstly, this passage is about the coming of the Messiah, and these particular verses speak of a Messiah who will bring 'good news for the poor.' This is interesting for two reasons.

Firstly, once again we have Jesus making a statement about just who he is – the Messiah. To his listeners, this was blasphemous. And secondly, this Messiah who will bring 'good news for the poor' is not the sort of Messiah the Jewish people were hoping for. They were looking for a warrior-type of Messiah who would lead their nation to victory over their many enemies. They were looking for a Messiah of vengeance, not grace.

So it is no wonder the people were upset and wanted to inflict a significant degree of pain and suffering on Jesus.

The other aspect I want to highlight is this – this passage is really about the coming of God's kingdom. After all, surely the coming of the Messiah and the coming of God's kingdom should, by definition, go hand in hand. Let us remind ourselves that God's kingdom is a society, a community where we live in harmony with one another and, most importantly, with God. By accepting Jesus as the Messiah, we accept the challenge of living our lives in accordance with God's will; of living lives of grace, kindness and compassion.

Or as Paul puts it in our reading from Philippians.... *'whatever is honourable, just, pure, pleasing and commendable.'* He urges us to *'keep on doing these things.'* In the end, God's kingdom is generated by you and me carrying out small acts of kindness. If we can all do this, then a community of grace can be created. Let me share with you a story I came across some time ago, but it is a story I always find very moving for its basic decency.

A trucker relates how he was travelling through North Carolina when a brown sedan merged on to the highway. It weaved back and forth between the lanes, causing the driver of the truck to shift into a lower gear. At first, he thought the driver was drunk, but when he came closer saw an elderly man shaking uncontrollably behind the wheel. He noticed a Citizen's Band aerial attached to the car, so he called on the radio, 'You in the brown Chevy, if you can hear me, pull over. Pull off the road.'

Amazingly, he did. The truckie pulled up behind the car and climbed from his cab. The elderly man staggered from his car and fell into the truckie's arms. He poured out a story of months of fear and pain because of the illness of his daughter, his only child. Now he was returning from the hospital where it was decided that she would cease any further treatment. In the hospital he remained strong and stoic for his daughter, but on the road he fell apart.

The two men talked for the good part of an hour and then the father decided he was ok to continue driving. The man embraced and the truckie followed him for 50 miles. As they drove along, the two men talked together on the radio.

The older man finally acknowledged that his exit was ahead and thanked his new friend again for his help. The truckie asked if he could make it home alright and suddenly, a third voice broke in on the conversation, 'Breaker 19, don't worry, good buddy. Go your way. I'll see him home.' Glancing in his rear vision, he saw a large livestock truck move into the exit lane behind the brown Chevy.

That truckie was special, not because of his status in the world, but simply because of his kindness and decency. We can all be like him. That's how we create God's kingdom here on earth, in our community. If enough people can come to a faith in Christ, and most importantly, live out that faith through kindness and service to their fellow human beings, then we can do honour and justice to Jesus as the embodiment of God here on earth. In other words, we can rightfully claim Jesus as the Messiah through our deeds and actions, and not just through our words.

Rev Warner Wilder