

A focal point in any Jewish town or village in Jesus' day, and also probably today, was the synagogue. A place of considerable importance where families would come together • to worship God in prayer and song, • to discuss the scriptures (like our 'Think & Drink' or any Bible Study group), and also, • to teach the children their history. So they'd learn about Abraham as 'founder of the faith'; they'd be excited by the story of Moses and the 'great escape' from Egypt (a story recited each year at the Passover Meal); they'd hear the stories of King David, and the wisdom of Solomon; as well as the sad exile of a whole generation to Babylon, before their returning to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple and the city; and a lot more besides!

In the synagogue, as in our own church today, there would be joyous times and sad times. It was the place where people would discuss their hopes and fears as a nation, and especially in the light of the scriptures, their longing for the coming Messiah. But also like church today too (if we're completely honest!), besides times of celebration and excitement, there would be other more humdrum times when the expectations of faith felt more subdued, and possible complacency crept in as they heard the familiar Scriptures. So many times they'd heard, from prophets, about what God would be doing *one day!* Yet there was still at that time, nonetheless, a heightened expectation that a Messiah would be coming to restore the political fortunes of Israel. So... when Jesus got up to read from the scrolls of the prophet Isaiah, when invited to do so at the synagogue at Nazareth synagogue, we can only second-guess how tuned-in, or otherwise, his hearers would have been. Some may have imagined it was to be a reading like all those before - telling of an idealised time, sometime in the future, without any sense of when. But then, suddenly, they become alert when Jesus declares, at the end of the reading, ***"TODAY... this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"***!

We see how the gospel writer plays this out in slow motion so as to convey a sense of expectation and create suspense... Jesus **reads the passage; he rolls up the scroll; he hands it back to the attendant; he goes back to his seat.** Awaiting the rabbi's customary interpretation of what had just been read, we are told '*all eyes were fixed on him*'. Were they really going to hear anything new? Possibly being the local boy returning home, there was a greater element of curiosity than usual - especially now his being a rabbi. Possibly too some had heard of his miraculous deeds and healings. Just like when we have a visiting preacher, there was probably a greater sense of expectation than when it's home team preaching! So "*all eyes were fixed on him*". And **then Jesus declares,** cutting straight to the core, saying... ***"TODAY... this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"***.

It would have been like a thunderbolt! Here in their midst IS the Messiah! Surely a call to revolution! As well as a spiritual awakening! Hopes and dreams, at long last, fulfilled before their very eyes!

At first, and in the verses immediately following omitted by the lectionary compiler, Jesus words are well received, and his listeners are caught up speaking excitedly about how wonderful he is! But, continuing his interpretation, as soon as he gives a couple of examples from the OT of God showing favour to people **outside of Israel**, and in the 2<sup>nd</sup> of these *to the extreme detriment of those within Israel*, there was complete uproar, and the support immediately evaporated. (A sermon for another day!

But the lection we have, notice, ends tantalisingly in mid-air, with Jesus speaking 'of fulfilment this very day'; the lection ends with neither his development of this, nor the people's reactions. I suggest deliberately so, from a lectionary perspective, in order to keep our focus on Jesus himself - identifying himself as the one Isaiah had written about some 600 years before; and as part of that gradual disclosure of Jesus' identity and purpose, within our post-Christmas readings, right through to - and including - Candlemas next week.

Here we find, in Jesus, the one appointed by God as Messiah to more fully disclose his own love and compassion for the world, and to proclaim '*the year of the Lord's favour*'. And specifically... to bring **hope** to those without hope, **freedom** to the captives, **healing** to the infirm, and **release** to all who are in any way oppressed. By his very words Jesus reveals that he himself is **the bringer of Good News**: not just for then in the context of the day, but for every day and all times.

But Jesus is not just the 'bringer' of Good News (amazing Good News!), he himself **IS** the Good News, its very embodiment, transforming lives. In another gospel he describes himself as '*the Way, and the Truth, and Life*' - showing us the way, communicating to us the truth, and giving us life - and assuring us as well he is '*the Resurrection and the Life*' - to all who desire to listen and believe.

May WE his followers seek to be like him so as to reflect his love and compassion to others, as both bearers and 'inhabitants' - like Jesus - of the Good News.

And always keep in mind that those words of Jesus in the synagogue, 2000 years ago in Nazareth, weren't just for those who heard him then, but for all believers, including all of us here present. So may that 'scripture' which Jesus read out in the synagogue '**be fulfilled**' in the outworking of OUR lives too! Amen.