

## Luke 4: 14-30

As I mentioned earlier, one of the things that we're doing this summer is distributing a copy of Luke's gospel to every household in Peebles. That's part of a national campaign during the Commonwealth Games – ¾ million of these Penny Gospels have been printed so far, and will be going through doors all around Scotland. That's a tremendously exciting opportunity for the people in Scotland, and because we're doing that, I thought it might make some sense if we were familiar with the book that we're giving out!

So starting today and continuing over the next few weeks, we're going to be in a teaching series called "Doctor's Report". Luke, the man who wrote this book as well as the book of Acts, was a doctor, a physician, and even if his scientific knowledge was 2000 years behind us, he had a very scientific, precise, accurate mind. He was very thorough – about a third of the material in his book is new, and doesn't appear in any of the other gospels. He doesn't try to analyse what happened – he just wrote down the facts, or where he didn't see them himself he spoke to as many eye-witnesses as he could, as he says in his introduction:

[Luke 1:1-4]

As far as we know, Luke never met Jesus in person – but he was determined to research the truth about this extraordinary man. And that's why we're going to study it too – to see if we can encounter who Jesus is.

We're not going to look at every single section in Luke, because we'd be here until Christmas; and in fact because Luke's gospel *starts* with Christmas and Jesus' birth, and I don't feel particularly Christmassy at the moment, we're going to start this morning in Luke chapter 4, where Jesus sort of makes his first public appearance. Can I encourage you as we work through this book to

fill in the gaps yourself! Read the chapters we miss, and re-read the chapters we cover, and see what new things you find.

What springs into your mind when you hear the word “manifesto”? Is that a word that makes you feel positive, or is it something that makes you feel cynical? Do you think of promises kept, or of promises broken?

Here’s a different one: what about the phrase “mission statement”? For those of you in business, if your managing director announces to you that the company have got a new mission statement, do you think “Yippee!”, or do you groan and think “here we go again...”?

The passage that we’re looking at today is one that many of you will know; it’s sometimes referred to as Jesus’ Manifesto, or his Mission Statement. The big difference between what he said, and what we often think of politicians and business leaders doing today is that Jesus actually did what he said he was going to do.

But I’m jumping ahead - let’s look at the passage.

Context: Jesus has not long started his public ministry; immediately before this event he had been taken by the Spirit to the desert, where he was tempted by Satan - that’s the first half of this chapter. He’s come back, still full of the Holy Spirit, and has been preaching and teaching around Galilee. We’re taking up the story from verse 14:

<sup>14</sup> Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. <sup>15</sup> He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

Jesus is the gossip of the region - front page of Newsweek magazine - everyone is talking about this amazing new rabbi who teaches in new ways, as though he actually knows what he's talking about.

<sup>16</sup> He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom.

So this is where he grew up - Mary and Joseph were from here, and came back here when Jesus was just a toddler. Jesus would have had his Bar mitzvah here in this very synagogue when he was about thirteen; he trained and worked here as a carpenter- this is a small town, and the people all knew him. So now he's come back to the synagogue; don't think of a big formal building - this probably would have been someone's house, which they used on the Sabbath as a meeting place. There might have been twenty or thirty men there.

He stood up to read, <sup>17</sup> and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

<sup>18</sup> "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

<sup>20</sup> Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down.

Because that's what they did in those days - they would stand to read the scriptures, and then sit down to teach. So everybody is excited - what's this home grown superstar going to say?

The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.<sup>21</sup> He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

<sup>22</sup> All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked.

Now this is where it starts getting strange. So far it sounds like everything has been going really well. But then,

<sup>23</sup> Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself!' And you will tell me, 'Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.' "

Why is Jesus being so cynical about them all of a sudden? Is he trying to pick a fight with them? And then it gets even stranger:

<sup>24</sup> "Truly I tell you," he continued, "prophets are not accepted in their hometowns.<sup>25</sup> I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land.<sup>26</sup> Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.<sup>27</sup> And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian."

So these sound like Sunday School stories. Why is Jesus telling them stories from the Old Testament, and what have those stories got to do with... well, anything? And then finally, the strangest thing of all - how do the people in Nazareth react when they hear what he has to say?

<sup>28</sup> All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.

<sup>29</sup> They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff.

So they're so mad they actually want to kill him!

<sup>30</sup> But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

So there are three questions that jump out when we read that story:

1. Why does Jesus suddenly seem to pick a fight with the people in Nazareth, when everything seems to be going so well?
2. Why does Jesus tell these two seemingly random stories?
3. Why do the people get so angry when he does?

To understand what happened, we need to understand a bit about the passage that Jesus read, and about the background to that.

You may know that in the Old Testament, the number seven was special - it was a kind of divine number. Every seventh day was to be set aside for God - a Sabbath day. Then every seven years there was to be a "sabbatical year", in which the land was to rest. It was an expression of God's concern for His creation and of God's concern for the poor.

Then after seven Sabbath years, every fifty years, was the really big deal. This was the year of Jubilee - later it was called the Year of God's Favour, where all debts were cancelled, all slaves and prisoners were freed, all land was returned to its original owner. This was a huge deal. And in fact it was completely unprecedented - nowhere else in the Ancient world do we find anything else like this.

There is only one problem with the Jubilee Year. They never actually observed it. As far as we can tell, it was never actually observed. The Israelites just couldn't let go of their stuff, and their land.

So, they never actually observed Jubilee. But when the Prophets would speak to the people, they would say:

You know, God hasn't given up on this Jubilee idea yet. It's a good idea. It's God's idea. We can't pull it off ourselves, but it is going to happen. It's going to happen when Messiah comes. When Messiah comes, He will proclaim the Jubilee, and He will make it stick.

And so, for example, the Prophet Isaiah wrote that the Messiah would say:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me ... (That's Messianic language. The Messiah is simply "The Anointed One.") ... to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the captive and release for the prisoners to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

That's Jubilee!

When Messiah comes, then Jubilee is coming!

But not just one year every fifty! When Messiah comes, it would be to bring a Jubilee that every year,  
every day,  
would speak good news to the poor,  
liberty to the captives,  
healing to the brokenhearted,  
forgiveness for the guilty,  
freedom for those who feel controlled,  
release for those who feel trapped.

Jubilee!

Now, back to our synagogue in Nazareth. The people there knew this text well. They knew that whoever announced the Year of Jubilee was saying that they were the Messiah! That they were the one that they had been waiting for all those hundreds of years.

And so are they excited?

No. They're really mad. Because they've got two problems here. The first is that this guy standing in front of them, this guy who is saying "I am the Messiah", is just Yeshua ben Jusef, the carpenter, Joseph's son, who they had known since he was a little kid. An unusual kid maybe, but still just a kid. He'd played as other kids do; he'd learned as other kids do. And there were those rumours about his being born out of marriage - rumours like that don't go away in a community like that. Sure, his mum had some story about Angels, but who's going to believe that?

But there's more. The second reason that they're mad is that Jesus has messed up the prophecy. You see, there's more in Isaiah's original piece. It's a message about hope for God's people, but it's also a message about vengeance for everyone else. Hope for the insiders, but vengeance for the outsiders.

This idea of vengeance, of getting even, is really important for a lot of religions. It's called a "vengeance clause". The Jews are really mad at the Romans, and they really want that vengeance part.

So when Jesus reads the prophecy, he gets to the line about proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour - and all the people are sitting there thinking "yeah, yeah, go on, this is the best bit..."

But Jesus stops. He misses out the vengeance clause.

It's not that vengeance isn't going to happen - it's that it's going to be when God chooses, in ways that God chooses, and it won't necessarily be for the people you thought it would come on. The Israelites have tried to put God in a box, and that just doesn't work.

And then just in case they've missed the point, Jesus really rubs their noses in it by telling these two stories about Elijah and Elisha. If you were here earlier in the year, you might remember one of them – they're both stories from a period in Israel's history when the nation is at a spiritual rock bottom. These are times when people like Ahab and Jezebel are in charge, and when the people have completely turned away from God.

The point about the woman that Elijah took care of was that she was from Sidon - in other words, she wasn't an Israelite! She was a gentile! There were plenty of Jewish widows, but Israel had rejected God.

And the guy that Elisha healed, Naaman, was even worse - he wasn't just a pagan gentile - he was the commander of the Syrian army - an army who Israel had been fighting in a long and very vicious war.

Jesus is saying that his ministry is going to have the same kind of flavour to it - because most of the "insiders" are going to reject it. So the good news, the Jubilee, is going to bypass those who should have known about it, and it's going to go to those who don't have a clue about it. Jesus is breaking the rules.

So we can begin to understand what was going on here. That's why the people of Nazareth were so angry with Jesus. That's *their* response.



What's ours?

I think there are three ways in which we can respond to what Jesus is saying here. The first one is how the people of Nazareth responded – they rejected the message. Actually, what they did is a bit more subtle than that; it wasn't that they didn't want the good news that Jesus was proclaiming – they just wanted it on their terms. They wanted it for them – for the people of Israel – for God's people! But they didn't want that for everyone else. They wanted it for the insiders, not for the outsiders.

The thing about God is that he will let you say that. It's your choice. We can see the result of that for the people of Nazareth in the last line there - "Jesus walked right through the middle of them and went away". If you want Jesus to just go away, he will.

The second way we can respond is to say – yes please! You can say to Jesus - "*I am* oppressed; *I am* blind; *I am* poor; *I am* a captive – Jesus, I want the freedom you're promising. I need to be in that Jubilee Kingdom."

You can be on that list in so many different ways. You might be feeling oppressed by life; you might be oppressed by bitterness and hatred and unforgiveness that you just can't let go of. You need to be set free.

You might be a captive – to your job. Or to your lack of a job. To your bank balance. To debt. To your mortgage. To your desire for more stuff. You might be a captive to drugs, or to alcohol, or to lust, or to pornography, or... whatever. Jesus is saying to you here "I can set you free", and you can say "Yes!"

You might be blind, or sick, or lame – whether that’s physical, or mental, or spiritual – Jesus is talking about all of those. You need healing. Let me say something about healing here; I don’t pretend to understand how healing works. God doesn’t always heal us – at least, not physically – sometimes he does, and sometimes he doesn’t, and we don’t understand why that’s so. Tony Campolo tells a story of how he has a friend who is Pentecostal. This friend said to Campolo, "You know, Jesus said the ministry of the church should be to preach, to teach and to heal. Now, you preach and you teach, but you don't do any healing stuff." This is what Campolo says: "I had to be honest. I said, 'I tried but not much happens.' My friend said, 'Well, you preach and not much happens. It hasn't stopped you.' So I started to do it. I started to go to church services and carry a little vial of oil. I do like it says in the Book of James—the oil on the head, the hands, the whole bit. Is there a great healing ministry? Not really. But some wonderful things do happen."

Campolo goes on to say that he was in a church in Oregon, and he prayed for a man who had cancer. In the middle of the week he got a telephone call, and it was his wife. And she said, "You prayed for my husband. He had cancer." I said, "Had?" Whoa, I thought, it's happened. She said, "He died." I felt terrible. She said,

Don't feel bad. When he came into that church that Sunday he was filled with anger. He knew he was going to be dead in a short period of time, and he hated God. He wanted to see his children grow up and his grandchildren grow up, and he was angry that this God did not take away his sickness and heal him. He would lie in bed and curse God. The more his anger grew towards God the more miserable he was to everybody around him. It was an awful thing to be in his presence. And you prayed for him, and when he left that church a peace had come over him and a joy had come into him. And, Tony, the last three days have been the best days of our lives. We've sung. We've laughed. We've read

Scripture. We prayed. Oh, they've been wonderful days. And I called to thank you for laying your hands on him and praying for healing.

And then she said something incredibly profound. Listen to it. She said, "He wasn't cured, but he was healed."

You might be poor – not just poor financially, but poor in Spirit. Poor in your relationship with God. If you are, and you know that, here's the good news for you: you're in a good place! That's why Jesus says a bit later on, "Blessed are poor in spirit". Where you're at the end of your rope. You're in a place where God can get to you. You're in a place where Jesus can say – come to me!

And we can say "Yes" to Jesus.

I said there were three responses we can make. The third one is different from the second, but we might make this response as well. It's where we say, "Jesus, you've proclaimed the Jubilee, you've announced that your Kingdom is going to be good news to the poor, to the captive, to the oppressed, to the blind – and we're your body. You've sent us to bring that Kingdom into reality for Peebles, or for Innerleithen, or for Biggar, or... So what's our part? What do you want us to do as a church?

The thing is, this isn't optional. This isn't a "nice to have" extra that we *might* do as a church. It's that, if we don't do this, we *aren't* church. It is not that loving the downtrodden will help the church, it's that we aren't the church until we do. Without the love of Christ, we may be a Christian enterprise, social club, or organization, but we are not the church.

James spoke about this. Let me read you this from The Message version, from James 2 verse 14:

Dear friends, do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, "Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!" and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup—where does that get you? Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?

James won't allow the church to hide behind our faith while not showing the love of Christ. He unmasked the hypocrisy and called it what it is - dead. Will you show the love of Christ to those who are hurting?

Don't let anybody ever tell you that being a Christian is just about a personal relationship with Jesus, and about your sins being forgiven. It is about those things – those are really important, really vital to our lives. But if we stop there, we're choosing to ignore what Jesus said his mission was. You can't talk about the Good News *for* you, without immediately looking at the Good News that's supposed to flow *through* you, to everyone else.