

Chrism Eucharist 2025

Luke 4:16-21, 17.4.25, Guildford Cathedral

Well, of course, I've preached on it many times before and so have most of you. I've preached on it at confirmations, ordination retreats, as part of a sermon series, and every year that Luke comes around in the Lectionary. At least two of you, Harry Latham and Keith Elford to name names, invited me to preach on it at your Licensing Services, as a kind of defining text for your ministry, just as several *Birmingham* clergy did before you. And yet this year I had the experience of what we might call 'preacher's block' as I tried to make fresh connections between Luke chapter 4 and this Chrism Eucharist. 'How does Jesus' first recorded sermon relate to Jesus' last recorded meal?' was the question I was struggling with. And it wasn't long before the pressure was building, the days were ticking by, and this awesome sense of privilege at preaching to quite so many gifted preachers on quite such a special day in the Church's year, was beginning to wear a little thin.

And so I took Hamlet's advice to poor Ophelia to 'Get Thee to a Nunnery': more specifically to the Ladywell Convent outside Godalming, where I gave myself the luxury of spending several hours just pondering this text, and praying that somehow my reflections on it might bring you hope and encouragement this morning. And quite how or whether those prayers were answered is of course up to you to judge.

Nazareth: that's where the story starts - a placename that appears 29 times in the Bible, and more than half of them in the writings of Luke. Nazareth *matters* to Luke, in other words, and perhaps it's the sheer *ordinariness* of the place - a dusty village set on a hilltop, roughly halfway between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean - which appealed to a man who regularly highlighted ordinary people in his two-volume work.

It's not Luke but John's Gospel which records Nathanael's rather catty question, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?', to which you and I know the pantomime answer, 'Oh yes it can!' before the scribes and Pharisees respond with 'Oh no it can't!' But whatever the reasons behind Nathanael's disdain, there was nothing much to recommend the place before that extraordinary visitation of the Angel Gabriel to the fiancée of the local carpenter.

So Jesus had been away from *his* hometown for a couple of months or more, and it had been quite a journey in every sense. That journey had taken him to the River Jordan, where he'd witnessed the stirrings of a national revival, as crowds of his compatriots were being baptised at the hands of his cousin John the Baptist. It had led him next to his own baptism, where the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove, along with that heavenly pronouncement, '*You are My Son, the Beloved: with you I am well pleased*'.

Jesus had then been led into the Judean desert, and an intense period of prayer and fasting, as the full implications of what it meant to be '*My Son, the Beloved*' were

examined and tested. What extraordinary powers lay within Jesus' reach: power to satisfy his every appetite, to vanquish his every enemy, to stun the world! And yet Jesus recognised those ambitions for what they were: not the promptings of the Holy Spirit but quite the reverse. And as he emerged from the desert, physically frail from the fasting, but filled with the power of the Spirit, Jesus began teaching in the Galilean synagogues, culminating in this return to Nazareth and to what we might call his sending parish.

We should think here more of a Quaker meeting house or maybe Café Church than a formal Sunday Eucharist. For one thing synagogue teaching was interactive, with plenty of come-and-go between speaker and listeners; for another, there was no preaching rota, but rather an invitation to those who so wished to share a message. (St. Paul regularly took up that invitation, as we know, in his later travels around the Mediterranean). And given Jesus' growing reputation, it wasn't long before he was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah and invited to teach. And note the verbs here: that Jesus stood, took the scroll, unrolled it, read it, rolled it up again, handed it back, sat down, then spoke.

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me', he read, 'because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me [as some Greek manuscripts add] to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour'.

And then he sat down, and that electric moment when the eyes of all were fixed upon him, before he simply continued, *'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'.*

For us, as readers of Luke's Gospel, we get it. In the desert Jesus discovered what we might describe as his 'uncalling' – what he was **not** being called to do as God's Son, the Beloved – to satisfy his every appetite, vanquish his every enemy, stun the world; whilst in the synagogue he articulated his calling – what He **was** being called to do as God's Son, the Beloved – to preach good news to the poor, release to the captive and so on. And at first his message was well received, as the electric charge of that word *'Today'* coursed through the veins of his hearers. But electricity is a dangerous thing, and once Jesus began to speak of the scope of that 'good news to the poor' – specifically that it applied to Gentiles just as much as to the people of Israel – there was a click of the switch and admiration turned to fury; indeed to the first attempt on Jesus' life since King Herod dispatched that hit squad to Bethlehem thirty years' earlier.

So just what **is** the scope of Jesus' good news to the poor? That's the big focus of Luke's Gospel, with poverty encompassing everyone with a low status in the world of Jesus' day. Women had that low status, and feature regularly in the gospel as disciples and role models. Children were the same. Foreigners, whether Romans, Samaritans or those strange Gerasenes who lived on the far side of the Sea, were treated with the greatest respect; whilst those who worked in dirty or disreputable professions – shepherds,

soldiers, tax collectors, even prostitutes – took their place among Jesus’ followers and around his table.

The unclean or infectious came close and were touched and healed; whilst in Jesus’ masterful story-telling, Good Samaritans, Repentant Tax Collectors, Prodigal Sons and Persistent Widows were compared favourably with Unfeeling Priests, Pompous Pharisees, Whining Older Brothers and Unjust Judges, with fatted calves killed for all the wrong kinds of people.

My friends we may differ on some of the more contentious issues in *‘Living in Love and Faith’* – but let’s never differ on this: that the Church of Jesus Christ is called to be the most welcoming, inclusive body of people on Planet Earth – and that includes, of course, those who are lesbian, gay or describe themselves as ‘same-sex-attracted’, and those who are intersex or who struggle to inhabit the sex of their birth.

But back to that specific question with which I wrestled for several hours in my Nunnery: How does Jesus’ first recorded sermon relate to Jesus’ last recorded meal? And here I came up with three answers.

One is **Lent**, of course – those 40 days in the desert that immediately precede today’s reading, where Jesus’ identity and calling were profoundly tested. And I hope and pray that the Lent that has just passed has been a rich if maybe testing time for you too, not least in confirming your own identity and calling as a child of God ‘in the Beloved’ and a Minister, whether lay or ordained, within His Church.

I’ve rediscovered the discipline of fasting this Lent – in fact we bishops have had a kind of ‘fasting rota’. And at points I’ve been hungry, and at other points a little sorry for myself, and I apologise especially to the vicar of All Saints Guildford for the odd grumpy patch along the way! But fasting has been a blessing too, through which I’ve experienced afresh the Spirit of the Lord upon me.

So there’s the Lent connection here; and then there’s the **Maundy Thursday** connection too. For those verbs as Jesus takes the scroll in Luke chapter 4 strike me as similar to the verbs as Jesus takes the bread and the wine eighteen chapters later: ‘Take’, ‘Bless’, ‘Break’, ‘Give’.

The priests among us today are ministers of both word and sacrament. We are given the awesome responsibility of taking the written Word of God and breaking it open for others to be blessed and nourished through its power; **and** we are given the equally awesome responsibility of taking the Bread and Wine of the Eucharist, and breaking them open for others to eat, to drink, and to receive God’s blessing afresh. And let’s never lose sight of either responsibility, or the amazing privilege of this ministry, in amidst the undoubted challenges and pressures that live alongside it.

So there's Lent. And there's Maundy Thursday. But perhaps the most moving insight I received as I got me to a Nunnery was the connection between Jesus' first sermon and **Good Friday**: not just the obvious connection - the dangers of electricity, and how admiration can turn to fury at the click of a switch - but something deeper than that, about Jesus' complete identification with the objects of Isaiah's great prophecy.

Because the truth is, of course, that the One who proclaimed good news to the poor himself became the poorest of the poor – nailed to a cross, with soldiers casting lots for his one remaining possession, the clothes he had been standing up in. And the One who proclaimed release to the captives was himself the most captive of captives, bound and frog-marched to his execution. And the One who proclaimed recovery of sight to the blind found himself in total darkness, crying out from the depths of his being, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' And the One who proclaimed the binding-up of broken hearts himself had his heart broken at Judas' denial, Peter's betrayal, the sight of his grieving mother, and worst of all that moment of dark abandonment.

Yes, even here there are tiny hints of hope: the cross was certainly good news for Barabbas, and a release of this captive, as Jesus' quite literally died in his place. And in those words – *'Today you will be with me in Paradise'* – Jesus was indeed proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour to another who appeared quite undeserving of it. But it's only in the light of the glorious Resurrection morning that everything began to make any kind of sense.

'You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ', wrote St. Paul, 'that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich'. 'We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses', reflected the writer to the Hebrews, 'but one who in every respect has been tested as we are' [*And Some!*, we might add] – 'yet without sin'.

And these are doubly powerful truths – reminding us **both** that Jesus is with us in the sufferings we undergo – he understands, because he has been there himself; **and** that Jesus can use those sufferings, however debilitating they may feel at the time, to make us better people, better pastors - those who can help others out of the pit because we've been there ourselves, or at least all too close to the edge. That's certainly been my experience through fifty years of Christian discipleship; and all those decades later, I can just begin to grasp Paul's teaching that we should rejoice in our sufferings. Not because suffering is anything other than awful at the time; but because, as he goes on, *'suffering produces endurance and endurance character, and character hope – and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit He has given to us'*.

I've preached on it many times before – but how rich is our gospel reading this morning, as we pray afresh for the Spirit of the Lord to come upon us and to anoint us to live and

proclaim the good news of God's beloved, incarnate, crucified, risen, conquering Son to all who know their need of it! For the Lord is here. God's Spirit is with us. Amen.