

Character and Content (Luke 4:14-21)

26th January 2025 – 10:00am Holy Communion

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release 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 he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

<Opening Prayer>

I've always had a health respect for teachers, but it's the crazy ones I remember the most.

For most of us, teachers both educate in knowledge and form us in character. Teachers ought to leave us with enquiring minds, the attitude and skills to learn, being observant, becoming good communicators, and being reflective and curious to understand a world in relentless change. For myself, I seek constantly to be taught and formed by God's remarkable character, and I hope we can all seek to be that way too.

As the Christian season of Epiphany ends so I pray that we may never cease to discover more about how God can be revealed in our lives. I find it a great help to think of the three persons of God like we think of the three dimensions of physical space. They are his canvas, so to speak, anything and everything could happen therein. God is not limited by our expectations nor is He afraid to *scandalise* by what He says or does. In a crude manner of speaking, The Almighty steps down from Heaven to get things done upon the Earth. **So, who knows what he might throw at us. By his awesome character, we pay attention.**

If I asked you to pick out a Bible story where God the Father steps in and makes *radical* things happen, then I'm sure you could all do so without much difficulty. Consider how God commissioned Noah to build the Ark mile inland, or Joshua to defeat the walls of Jericho. So too ultimately with Jesus Christ. **What we find when we look at scripture is the God of Surprises who can bring sweeping change in an instant, who is unlimited by his own creation, the one true God who is the head of all things.**

Yet somehow this great God of creation is all too easily boxed in by us. There is a tendency to limit Him to being the subject of our fixed set of

beliefs and expectations. Yes, we have those good things defined by the past and called *truth, doctrine* and *tradition*. But there is some danger in there because we all too easily conflate our own views with those of God – giving them the status of doctrine. If we seek to follow God and be formed ever more into his likeness, then that brings to us also the trait of the radical. We cannot set aside the inconvenient parts of God’s character which seem to bring uncomfortable challenge. **Surely, we must maintain a place for the awesome character of God, who may break out of His expectation and do something quite different by his Holy Spirit, through people and in places quite unexpected.**

If it is God’s work to create and destroy, and Christ’s work to save, then it is the work of the Holy Spirit to *inspire and empower*. It is the least conformed and most unpredictable person of God.

The visit of Jesus to the synagogue, early in his Earthly ministry, provides a most radical and scandalous speech, and it all comes down to God’s astounding plan, fuelled by the Holy Spirit. After a time of retreat, Jesus emerges, fully loaded, from the desert. **If Christ’s baptism in the Jordan was his inauguration, then his reading of Isaiah in the synagogue that day was his acceptance speech, for what God intended in His life.**

“Jesus, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread throughout all the surrounding country.”

It was a chiselled text from a familiar prophet, spoken by a recognised local person in the normal appointed place and on the usual day. What could possibly go wrong?

When Jesus spoke in the synagogue that day he was in *inductive* mode. He put his big claim out there first, then showed it was true, in time, by his unfolding ministry and actions. The initial big claim was *'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'* It certainly grabbed their attention: *'The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.'*

It seems quite possible for us to become convinced of a person's worthiness more by their attention-grabbing character than by their content. It's a weakness we have, and it's very easily exploited. Niccolo Machiavelli, that most manipulative Italian politician, knew well that *persuasion is created more on perception than on reality*. Start by say something outrageous, and it's best if it's a recognisable semi-plausible half-truth, *but say it well!*

On that Jesus had achieved no more or less than any political claimant at this point, he has just walked out of the wilderness, he had to deliver. But you know, Jesus didn't make the truth or change it, he fulfilled it. So it would prove to be. Isaiah was read that day, but how many other prophets, speaking God's word, were also fulfilled by Christ in the next years? **Jesus didn't set up his own chosen picture to fulfil in his own terms.**

Scripture is replete with warnings about character:

Matthew 24 - For many will come in my name, saying, "I am the Messiah!" and they will lead many astray. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead many astray.

1 John 4:1 - Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

Acts 4:12 - "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

What Jesus said that day was outrageous, and it was an attention-grabber and a blockbusting statement of character, **but it was also actually true**. Jesus stood to gain little from his claims (and there is a test of leadership worthiness for you - *Jesus stood to gain little from it*), 'other than to do the will of He who sent me' – and that was his ultimate rejection and death for everyone. **How many other leaders would start by telling you that was their goal?!** There has never been one quite like him.

The ministrations of the early church, and throughout history to the activities of the Church today, have always held the Holy Spirit to be an arbiter of radical change and the decisive ingredient required for any Christian endeavour. One can receive the Holy Spirit at the rites of initiation – baptism, confirmation and ordination. Also, in the sacrament we share at his table. But you can pray anytime for God to set his Spirit within you, and you should.

I find it amazing that the same Holy Spirit which was poured out on Jesus is yet also poured out for us, and upon us, and can be upon anyone. Ask God, and he will provide you with his Spirit. **And as he does, expect new things to happen, often with radical breaks from the past.**

The Holy Spirit remains a mystery, we cannot capture it and our theology cannot contain it. It blows wherever it wishes. I struggle too, to make a reasonable definition here today. **If any minister or preacher ever tries to convince you that he or she has sorted out the Holy Spirit, and know what it wants for us all, then I urge you to avoid them.**

The only thing we can be absolutely sure of is that *without* the Holy Spirit, our endeavours will always be limited to human understanding, and human understanding alone is never enough for the world. **We must, be both taught and formed by God's character, as seen in Christ, and made possible in us by his Spirit.**

Amen.