Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a; **Luke 4: 14-21**

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.’

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Two of today’s bible readings contain stories of the public reading of Scripture, so they seem as good a place to start as any. In Nehemiah chapter 8, we see the impact of hearing the word of God on a community who have resettled and been involved in the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem. In Luke 4, we see Jesus standing up to read from the Book of Isaiah in his local synagogue in Nazareth.

We do tend to think of the Book of Nehemiah in terms of the physical rebuilding of Jerusalem - I remember, one of the first Bible study groups I led back in Cornwall, ten or twelve years ago, was on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah; and some people got really hung up on all the details of the rebuilding work that was being undertaken, such that I struggled to take them into the theology of the story - however, the bit we heard today points to that second element of Nehemiah’s work: that of rebuilding the spiritual community. Central to this rebuilding and revitalising of the spiritual community was gathering the people together to hear the book of the Law of God being read.

There is clear concern from all the leaders, Ezra the priest, Nehemiah the governor and the Levites that the people listening should understand what they heard. Many from this crowd of people had lived most of their lives far away from Jerusalem and were not really familiar with Hebrew, the language that the book of the law was written in. The leaders therefore had to both translate and interpret the text – not much different from our practice of reading and then preaching. Interesting that the people’s response was such an emotional one – they were taking God’s word really to heart. But Ezra and Nehemiah encouraged them to do more than that – they sent them off to celebrate (and we talked about the importance of celebration as a response to God last week) and crucially to share that celebration with those who had nothing prepared.

And then in the reading from Luke’s gospel: Jesus, as was his normal practice, went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. He is asked to read and given the scroll of Isaiah. He reads, hands the scroll back and sits down. Then Jesus, like the leaders we heard about in Nehemiah, also goes on to talk to the people, explaining to them - with, if you like, superhuman insight - what he has just read.

There’s verse 21: Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. If we had read on, we would see that those who had listened to him were impressed and spoke well of Jesus. But at the same time, they could not grasp that this man could be who he was claiming to be. Nor could they quite accept the sheer generosity of God in extending His grace to everyone. In fact the more they listened, the more confused and disturbed they became, so that, in verse 29, if we’d read that far, we would hear: They got up and drove him out of town.

One key question for today then is: how do we - you and I - attend to the reading of Scripture? Do we sit down with relief and turn off for a few minutes, assuming this doesn’t apply and isn’t relevant to us and our situation? Make a mental shopping list? Read the notices on the pew leaflet? Or do we listen with concentration, trying to make connections for ourselves between these ancient words and our lives today?

And then, having heard something of the scriptures, how do we respond to them? Not often with weeping, I am guessing... but can we honestly and with integrity do the worship and celebration bits perhaps? And act on what we hear, and live it out in the world?

In the reading from the first letter to the Corinthians, we find the apostle Paul addressing the church members in Corinth, a church struggling with deep divisions. In his own inimitable and convoluted style, Paul uses the image of one body – words that I often use in the introduction to the Peace: in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. Whatever gifts and talents we have can be used by God for the good of all people. The church, as one body, lives by remembering and retelling the story of God’s engagement with the world. A story that finds its climax in the life and work of Jesus, the Son of God.

Jesus is here in the synagogue and this is his first declaration of what he is about – he quotes Isaiah: the spirit of the Lord is upon me and he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. For the last few weeks, we have had a series of firsts, with some idea of who Christ is being revealed to us, but also with a sense that Christ himself is engaging with what it means to be called, as he was at his baptism, the beloved son of God.

This passage adds a sort of revelation – for us and for the people who were there at the time. All eyes were fixed on him…. The people are trying to work out what he might be meaning but not really being able to grasp the enormity of it.

It was Augustine who said: we can only say what God is not. But this is the beginning of how we actually can get an idea of who God is. In this Word made flesh, we get, if you like, a self-expression of the Divine; God is giving us himself in human form; a loving and life-giving being, so that we can at least begin to know what God is like.

And one of the ways we start to understand what that means is by the enactment of that understanding: we get to know the truth by participating in the way of Jesus Christ. Revelation is not just about words but about action. The people won’t get it properly unless they join in with the acts not just listen to the words.

I discovered the phrase recently: we cannot think ourselves into a new way of acting; but we can act ourselves into a new way of thinking. And I am constantly finding new applications for it.

We can’t think ourselves into a new way of acting, but we can act ourselves into a new way of thinking.

So then, what is it that Jesus is calling those people to do? What is participation going to look like? His saying that he has come to proclaim good news, release the captive, give sight etc – all that is very concrete: Jesus expresses it through his friendships, his healing, and ultimately his death and resurrection.

So to participate with Christ in that calling is to involve ourselves in those same actions – in whatever way they present themselves to us in our own lives – that is how the body of Christ lives out its faith in the world. It is living the Good News.

And it is in that experience that we actually come to discover who Christ is. If we have voted for the charities we want to support in the coming year; and contributed to the toiletries collection for the foodbank; and offer our financial support to the church; and welcome a stranger in the neighbouring pew, we are part-way there.

**Amen**