

# THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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## Today's Bible reading

*Luke 4:14-21 ("The rejection of Jesus at Nazareth")*

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.' Amen. (NRSV)

## Today's hymns

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise* (CH: 132)

*Make me a channel of your peace* (CH: 528)

*I waited patiently for God* (CH: 31)

*Fairest Lord Jesus* (CH: 463)

*You are called to tell the story* (CH: 680)

**A**t this stage in the year, we have passed from Advent into Christmas and on to Epiphany, and what a passage that represents. Only a few short weeks ago we were hearing news of angels visiting a young girl and her older cousin. They were to have sons, each in remarkable circumstances. Shortly afterwards, John was born to Elizabeth, with Jesus arriving (we assume) some months later. Now, however, we find all of the Christmas story firmly behind us. John and Jesus are grown up, and the world is about to change.

I recently read an interesting piece by the American biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann in which he notes the closeness of the relationship between these two second cousins. Here's what Brueggemann says:

*The distance between John the Baptizer and Jesus is small, not more than a millimeter, but it is a space upon which our faith turns. It is the huge leap between advent and preparation and the birth of newness in the Christ.*

I like that idea of, "the birth of newness in the Christ". Of course, we look to Christmas for the physical birth of a unique human being, Jesus of Nazareth. But if we move beyond the physical, perhaps we can see that it takes an adult Christ actually to lead us to "the newness", which is precisely what he does today in our reading from Luke chapter 4.

Remember that as recently as the closing stages of Luke chapter 3 Jesus has gone down to the river to be baptised by John along with countless others who were hungering for a fresh start. Here is what Luke tells us about a moment of revelation: *Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*

Next, the wilderness was the place to go, as Jesus went into the desert for 40 days, to face temptation. That must have been tough in so many different ways, yet maybe that very toughness galvanised Jesus, making him ready for the world-changing challenges to come.

Birth ... baptism ... affirmation ... temptation ...

But what next? Well, what comes next is that huge leap to newness of which Walter Brueggemann writes. A mere carpenter's boy no longer, there is indeed a newness about Jesus as he sets about his mission. He's changed, and changed in a big way.

Think about a young person you know: someone who has gone through change as a kind of transition into a new way of being. The girl who moves from school to university, and emerges as a biochemist, fully formed and ready to go into an exciting profession. Or what about the young, gangling teenager who joins the Royal Navy and travels the world fixing helicopters on a gleaming new aircraft carrier. When he returns to civvy street, he's still the same person ... yet he's not. Something has changed. There has been a real transition that has been made.

For Jesus, his Baptism, coupled with those 40 days and 40 nights of temptation, have brought him to a newness of purpose. And so this man - this poor and humble peasant - finds himself on the cusp of something unimaginably big. Into his local synagogue he walks, almost certainly much as he had done, sabbath by sabbath, throughout his 30 or so years. Nazareth would have been a small place back then - archaeologists reckon it might have been home to around 400 people: that's a couple of streets by our modern standards. What this means is that everyone would have recognised Jesus either as a family member or as a neighbour. He was known.

There in the familiar setting of the local synagogue, Jesus is handed a scroll of the Hebrews Scriptures which he unrolls. He reads Isaiah's prophetic words about God's Spirit being upon him ... being chosen by God to bring good news to the poor ... being sent to proclaim liberty to captives and the restoration of sight to those who are blind ... being subject to a calling to set the oppressed free ... announcing that the time had come for God to save his people.

Whose words are these? Well, obviously, they are the words of Isaiah. Everyone knew that. Yet in the hands of Jesus, that scroll takes on a new meaning and a pressing urgency. And in the mouth of Jesus, these ancient words acquire a freshness and a validity that the people of Nazareth could never have foreseen. And, as if to set the seal on this newness, Jesus turns to the astounded worshippers, their eyes fixed upon him, and utters those words which were about to herald a time of newness for all:

*'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'*

And so we come to see Jesus not just as any old Nazarene who, for all we know, may well have spent his early life helping Joseph to cut timber or to trim doors. This was a Jesus of undeniable newness, a Jesus of calling and purpose, ready to set off on a journey of faithfulness which would find its endpoint - its very fulfilment - in the drama of Holy Week. That journey would see more heavenly affirmations, and it would bring temptations of its own. Ultimately, it would see Jesus remain true to his heavenly Father.

Recall how this story goes. If we jump ahead to Luke chapter 7 we find Jesus out and about, while John languishes in chains. There in his cell, he has received reports of what his second cousin has been up to, but he wants affirmation of all he has heard. Two of his followers are sent to Jesus with this vitally important question:

*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*

How does Jesus respond? He does not turn to deep theology to give the pair their answer. He makes no attempt to dwell on his sense of calling or on what that calling might mean in time to come. No. Echoing that passage from Isaiah chapter 61, Jesus effectively tells John that the signs are everywhere if only the people will look. Good signs. Life-enhancing signs. Signs of newness seen in a Kingdom coming very close in the shape of nothing less than God in sandals ... God-incarnate ... God in Jesus:

*Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.*

So where does this leave us in the cold, dark month of January? It leaves us pondering who it is that God has chosen to bring new life. Is it Jesus, and only Jesus? Or are those who choose to follow also in some sense "chosen ones"?: Peter and Andrew and James and John?; Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas and Matthew?; Paul and Timothy?

You and I? Are we chosen to be heralds of God's newness?

If we believe that the Incarnation is truly about a whole lot more than shepherds and angels and wise men from the East, then we must learn to take incarnation seriously - and to take Jesus seriously when he shows how to defeat the powers that would drag humanity down. There is Good News, sent from heaven to be lodged in us, and to be shared in action and in message: Good News which has the capacity not only to heal a world in deep distress, but to tilt that world on its very axis.

In Jesus of Nazareth, the time has come when the Lord will save his people. Amen.

## Praying for others

God of the call,  
just as you led Jesus out of his familiar life  
lead us, we pray, into this world of need.

Transform our faltering minds into the mind of Christ,  
that we might imagine a world where your justice reigns.

Change our hearts into hearts fit for your service,  
moved by compassion to bring healing  
where it is so badly needed.

Fill our mouths with Good News to be shared  
across a community which needs your Love and  
around a world of such pain and division.

At this time of suffering in the island nation of Tonga  
we recall all those who are affected by the aftermath of  
the recent volcanic eruption.

Bless your church in Tonga, so that it may show your care.

Call your Church, Lord, and inspire us to walk at the side of your Son,  
in whose Name we pray. Amen.

## And finally ...

*Abigail Morrison considers surgery:*

I don't know if any of you have been watching the BBC programme *Surgeons: At the Edge Of Life*. There have been several series of this programme but the current one is from Addenbrookes and Royal Papworth Hospitals in Cambridge. So many things have struck me watching this programme that, along with my occasional *And Finally* series on fences, I may do one on surgery!

One of the first things that you can't fail to notice is the teamwork involved in the treatments. Though the programme focuses on the surgeon, the operating theatre always has several other people in it. The anaesthetists usually get a bit of screen time. I have to say the nurses often don't, which is a failing. But they are there none-the-less.

Often, on these very complex operations, there are two surgeons. One procedure involved a cranial neurosurgeon removing a huge tumour followed by a plastic surgeon repairing the dirty great hole the tumour had left. Even the co-operation to move around the operating theatre without bumping the surgeon's arm or knocking over a tray of instruments is quite a feat, never mind working together on the tasks required to keep the patient alive during the procedure and to do the very difficult, usually finicky, operation itself.

The series is about surgeons, so they get top billing. What they do is incredible, utterly amazing. But they couldn't carry out any of these operations without a team of dedicated professionals working alongside them. No man is an island - we all rely on others all the time.