

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Luke 4: 16-30 ("The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth")

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.' All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." ' And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.' When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Here in this place new light is streaming (CH: 623)

Hands to work and feet to run (CH: 523)

Praise, my soul, the King of heaven (CH: 160)

Jesus shall reign (CH: 470)

Summer is here and with it all sorts of opportunities which lie ahead in the sweet, sunny days to come. Holiday adventures and ice cream? Or perhaps unending days of heavy rain and nothing worth watching on the telly - only time will tell. Yet, as we look ahead across the next couple of months, one prospect is set fair despite the workings of the Met Office: our summer services for 2022.

You may recall over the last fortnight that I told everyone we'll be learning from Luke in the next couple of months. Our plan for July and August is that we should make time to take a summer trip across the longest book of the New Testament, both in church Sunday by Sunday and at home with our own "scribbleable" gospels, seeing what the writer Luke has to say about the Jesus he presents to his readers.

Just to recap on last week's discussion, Luke's approach to Jesus is one that combines the heights of heavenly grace with the depths of human suffering:

- ✦ Jesus, says Luke, is all about **God** intentionally coming to earth in human form;
- ✦ Jesus is Good News for **everyone**, irrespective of their background or faith;
- ✦ Jesus has a very clear bias to the **poor**, plus some grave concerns over wealth;
- ✦ Jesus bears **burdens** of different shapes and sizes, a bit like an ox; and
- ✦ Jesus is an **outsider** in a cruel world which would happily keep him sidelined.

Note those emphasised words: **God ... everyone ... poor ... burdens ... outsider**, because these are some of the most significant ideas found all across Luke's gospel.

This week we'll take these introductory thoughts forward a little, seeing how they might relate to one story of Jesus found very early on in Luke's gospel. As we know from today's reading, Jesus is on home territory. He is in the village of Nazareth (a 1st century village with maybe 400 residents - much, much smaller than either the village of Longniddry or the village of Macmerry). Moreover, our reading tells us that Jesus is in the local synagogue, a place where you might fully expect him to have gone each Saturday his whole life through. So, in both his local community and in his place of worship, Jesus would certainly be a "well-kent" figure, with friends all around him and more than a few family members close at hand as well.

The story of Jesus in the Nazareth synagogue is one that is really important to Luke. Although it appears three times across the gospels (in Matthew, in Mark and, of course, in Luke) the version we have read today is by far the most detailed - it has roughly three times as many words as the other two! But why should Luke have gone to so much extra bother? It's a fair question, and one worth considering.

Last week we spoke about Luke's Christmas story as being an "overture" to the book as a whole. This week we come to nothing less than the "curtain-raiser" in all its dramatic - almost cinematic - intensity. Luke wants to attract our attention:

[Jesus] 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.'*

Wow! What an opener! Jesus tells his neighbours and his family that *God has chosen him*. He tells them that *God has chosen him* to focus on those who are poor, to release

those who are imprisoned, to bring sight to the blind, to free those who are downtrodden, and to declare that God is on their side. That's the message! And such a statement of intent. He it is who will bear the burdens of those who are so tired ... so ground down ... so distraught in so many ways.

Right at the outset, then, we find this bold assertion: Jesus' mission is *God's* mission.

At first, all goes well for Jesus and he gets a big thumbs-up from those around him, as family, friends and neighbours voice their amazement at the power of his message. But then things start going wrong - in the synagogue's mind at least - when Jesus makes reference to two biblical incidents: when a Samaritan widow was helped by Elijah; and when a Syrian suffering from leprosy was healed by Elisha. In those days there were plenty of Jews in need, but it was *Gentiles* whom God helped.

In a flash we find that Jesus has moved from the drama's leading man to the villain of the piece, and in a big, big way. He has gone out of his way to say that God's care and concern are not limited to one tribe or temple, but are there for *all*. To us it may not seem all that radical a message, but to those folk at weekly worship, Jesus' words proved incendiary. Escaping the furious throng that Sabbath day, Jesus leaves the synagogue and moves on and away from his own home town. (And some that day might have viewed Jesus as fortunate to have escaped with his life.)

But what happens next? As Luke likes to put it again and again across the wide sweep of his writing, Jesus "journeyed on". Off he goes to the wilderness and then to the towns, eventually journeying on to Jerusalem and journeying on to the death which Luke firmly presents as being Christ's God-appointed destiny. Journeying on time and again, Jesus knows just what this trek will involve and also how it is set to end in wood and in nails ... *and* in glory - all in the company of God. Yes, it's a long road alright: even after the Resurrection the Risen Jesus journeys on in the company of two strangers on the road to Emmaus. With Jesus, the journeying is utterly vital.

For Luke, as the biblicist Richard Burridge puts it, Jesus being "on the road" represents the pursuit of *our salvation*. He "bears the burdens of the poor, the captives and the blind, the oppressed and widows, as he travels beyond local and national concerns to the Gentiles, to declare 'the year of the Lord's favour'."

Think back to last week once more. We noted then that over the centuries artists and illustrators have depicted Luke's gospel (and, by extension, Luke's Jesus) as being like an ox. Yes, the ox is the supreme beast of burden, capable of carrying the heavy loads of many people. And yes, the ox is associated with religious sacrifice through the letting of blood on an altar. But there was something more to oxen: they were animals whose hard, hard work should always be hugely appreciated.

The ox then is a most valuable asset. But beware the allure of possession. Only Luke's gospel contains this challenging line: 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.'

Only Luke's gospel contains the parable of the rich fool, in which a wealthy man dies in the night, unable to take with him all the gold, all the stuff he has amassed over so many years. 'This is how it is,' says Jesus, 'with those who pile up riches for themselves but are not rich in God's sight.'

The curtain has risen on the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, who might better be described as Jesus *from* Nazareth, Luke's teacher of tough and uncompromising truths for all to hear and for some to recoil at. Thus, he journeys on.

Are we prepared to journey with him to play our part in the mission of God? Amen.

Praying for others

God of all the earth,
in another week when dozens of migrants have died we pray for all who feel
compelled to leave their homes for a better life elsewhere.

Let them find safety and a warm welcome wherever they are.

We pray for those in Bangladesh suffering from devastating floods and
the Japanese people enduring a dangerous heatwave.

Help us all to do our utmost to combat climate change.

Bless world leaders who have such influence over so many policies.

Help them work together to create a world where peace, security, good health and
prosperity can be found in everyone's home country.

We give thanks for the life of Dame Deborah James and for the many people like her
who battle ill health and face death with courage. We ask you to bless her family
and all the families who have lost someone they love this week.

Stand near them that they may take strength from your love for them.

We thank you for those who spend their time raising funds to help others, whether
to help the poor, the ill or the forgotten. Crown their endeavours with success.

We ask these blessings in Jesus' name.

Amen.

And finally ...

Robin Hill considers words and The Word:

This summer in church we are looking at the Gospel according to Luke. By taking
time to dig deep into the longest book of the New Testament we hope to learn all
about Jesus from the viewpoint of one very gifted author.

In advance of this nine-week season the church bought our members a big box of
Luke's gospels so that each could take their personal copy home. That may seem
bizarre given that everyone in the church already has her or his own Bible. The
point, though, is that people's "proper" Bibles tend to be seen as precious. In
comparison, a tiny wee Luke's gospel (costing all of 43p) is there to be written on,
highlighted, scrunched into back pockets and generally rough-handled. In this
way readers can get in touch with the text in what we might call a "scribble-able"
setting in which the words are taken seriously even as the paper on which they are
printed really isn't. Get an idea? Scribble it down. See a connection? Draw an
arrow. Find something that jumps out at you? Grab a highlighter and let the ink
flow. Basically, fill your Luke book with your own ideas.

What are sacred texts all about? Finest leather and beautiful paper with a little silk
place marker? No, they are truly to do with inked-in wisdom from bygone eras -
printed words which together allow The Word to emerge before our wondering
minds and our scribbling hands.