



Sermon Series – God with Us

Luke 4:16-21 #5 Your mission manifesto 24/01/21

What is your vision for the world? If you were asked for your **top 5** list for humanity's future, what would it be?

Last week newsmedia presented **vision statements** a-plenty:

- President **Joe Biden** shared his vision for a better America,
- African-American poet laureate **Amanda Gorman** wowed us with her performance and her vision of a just and peaceful world,
- **Survivors** of the **Hiroshima** bombing pleaded for *their vision for a world* without nuclear weapons to be adopted (as Japan Australia & America refused to sign the UN Treaty banning nuclear weapons),
- And, **Cricket Australia** took a stand for a vision of a future where **first nations people** are treated **equally** and with **justice**, and it wasn't a **flash day** for our Prime Minister as a result.

Hearing what others **hope for humanity** moves me to ask, "What is Jesus' vision"? Is my own vision for the world like his, or am I at odds with him?

Luke 4:18-21 gives us a significant insight. These words are sometimes referred to the "**Nazareth Manifesto**".

It was common for a visiting rabbi to be invited to **read aloud** from the Scriptures at a synagogue meeting. But **no one**, especially his own **hometown** congregation, would have expected what happened next.¹ In **verse 21**, after reading aloud from the scroll, Jesus said to them

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

¹ See what unfolds in Luke 4:22-30

Jesus' mission and vision

Jesus **chose these particular words**² from the Old Testament Book of Isaiah, to apply to *himself* and *his* mission.³ Why **these words**?

'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.' (Luke 4:18,19)

In its original setting, **Isaiah 61** addressed the situation of **God's people in exile, enslaved** to world superpowers and **displaced** from their sacred land and temple. They were "the poor" of that text. They needed God to be their **liberator**, their **healer**, their **redeemer**.

But here in Luke 4, Jesus applies the text directly to himself and to the ultimate fulfilment of its purpose – not only for Israel, but **for all** who follow him.

1. Firstly, note the **reference to the Spirit of God** (vs. 18). Jesus' mission and vision are **uniquely** tied to God's mission and vision.
2. Then see how Jesus' vision is that **the poor** will hear his **good news**. Luke has told us Jesus is **good news** for all people⁴ and for all nations⁵, **right?** But in reality, Jesus is good news **for some more than others**.⁶
 - Rome's magnificence was **built on the backs** of slaves. There was an extensive underclass that was "the poor" of those days. They rarely received "good news".

² there is no evidence that synagogue readings followed a lectionary or set order of readings for meetings of the calendar year as some churches do today. Luke sees this as a critical moment and puts it earlier in his chronology than does Mark 6 or Matthew 13, and they both omit the Scripture reading altogether

³ Jesus is, by his own reckoning, both the prophet of God, and the fulfiller of this great prophecy.

⁴ The angel declared this to the poor shepherds in Luke 1, though it was qualified with "on whom God's favour rests"

⁵ Zechariah's song and Simeon's prophecy over the Christ-child affirm the far-reaching offer of God's salvation to all

⁶ This verse has been the subject of many different factional views in Christianity about whether to be taken literally (ie "the poor") or with reference to Israel in exile (e.g. Isaiah 41:17), or in a "spiritual" sense as some read the Beatitudes of Matthew 5 to be.

- Worse still, corrupted **religion** increased the divide between **rich** and **poor**. Outcasts, sinners, orphans, widows, foreigners – they all fit the category of “the poor” in Jesus re-casting of this text. Remember how Jesus did **not** hold back in denouncing Pharisees⁷ who used religion to **the advantage** of the religious elite at the **expense** of the weak and the outsider?⁸

There is **no favoritism** in God⁹, but when Jesus’ Gospel meets a system **riddled with inequity and injustice**, the rich and the self-sufficient **don’t hear it as good news**.¹⁰ Isaiah 58 challenged inequitable Israelites in the same manner centuries before.

- Jesus’ birth was first announced to peasant hired-hands in a Palestinian field, not to a palace or a temple.
- He hung out with the poor, he lived like them, and
- he shared with them good news that they are **made in the image of God** and are equally offered God’s love and grace.¹¹ **Good News!**

During my ministry in the leafy suburbs of Kew many years ago, I used to regularly hand out **blankets** and cans of food at my back door to **homeless men**. We tried to find ways to help them break **out of the cycle of homelessness**. But one night I was reminded of this other dimension of Jesus’ vision for life in Luke 4. One of the **regular returnees** asked me straight up, “Vicar, **do you think God loves me** even after all the bad things I’ve done?” It struck me that our church had not given him, or those like him, adequate opportunity to hear **good news**.

Jesus’ manifesto envisions a world where “the poor” **hear good news from Jesus, about Jesus** – good news that God loves them.

⁷ An organised party of Jewish religious leaders with great influence over the daily lives of Jews

⁸ Matthew 23:1-36

⁹ James 2:9; Acts 10:34

¹⁰ See the example in Luke 18:18-30

¹¹ Jesus demonstrates this in the accounts of the New Testament by always hanging out with outcasts and so-called “sinners” E.g. Luke 7:34

3. Now too in Luke 4 that Jesus' vision is of a future where the **oppressed are free, prisoners are released, and the blind receive sight.** (vs.18)
- **Dr Anthony Fauci** told the Whitehouse press corps last week that Trumps departure was like **being freed** from a prison.
 - **Bernie Sanders** wished he could **be freed** from sitting through that long cold inauguration ceremony!
 - But the surely the relevant news item was the long-awaited release of many **Manus Island refugees** from the inhumane incarceration in hotel quarantine for twelve months!¹² What **relief** they expressed upon their **release!**

Imagine a world, with Jesus, where the **wrongful use of power** to imprison to oppress or to enslave the weak is overturned! For *this*, Luke 4 wants us to see, Jesus came.

Church history has **two**, often divided, **responses** to Jesus' words:

- i. On the one side, **advocates for Christian social justice** interpret Jesus literally in verse 18 and consider the dismantling of **dehumanizing systems in society** fundamental to a church's mission. By freedom, Jesus meant **real liberty** now, they say.
- ii. On the other hand, Christians from a **reformed tradition** often lean towards a more **spiritual interpretation** of Jesus' words, saying that the Gospel brings release inwardly to those who are **captives to sin**. Jesus was speaking figuratively, they say.

But why not **draw together both** interpretations of vs. 18:

- Regarding **spiritual liberty**, it's curious to note that Jesus **did not engage** the secular/state authorities of his day directly. It wasn't Christian nationalism, or a pure political party that Jesus came to give the world. Let's affirm that Jesus came to **renovate** the root

¹² The UN declared such quarantine as a contravention of human rights

of the problem, to transform hearts pre-disposed by sin to **enslave** and **subjugate others** and to **elevate** self.

- But regarding **physical liberty**, let's also remember that Apostles like Paul and James scolded people for **inaction towards injustice**. Their words planted the seeds that led to the eventual **abolition of slavery** across the whole Roman Empire. Christians today should be at the forefront of overturning **unjust** incarceration, undoing **wrongful** enslavement, and calling out **violations** of human rights as a fundamental expression of the vision Jesus has for the world.

It's poor theology, in my view, to only **spiritualize** Jesus' words in Luke 4:18 regarding liberation. To do so is to, ironically, reveals our own **spiritual blindness**, all while reading a text that promises sight!

As the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann once put it,

"Personal, inner change without a change in circumstances and structures is an idealist illusion, as though a human were only a soul and not a body as well."

Jesus' **vision for a liberated world** fits the biblical idea of "redemption" through the cross perfectly. God's saving grace is likened to the **paying of a ransom** to **free** a slave from captivity to an owner. Jesus' vision is for a world freed from **sin's captivity** and then empowered to **love and accept and serve others**. The **key** lies in a **radical transformation** of the **heart**. The **fruit** of that change must **lead to real liberty** for the **least** and the most **oppressed among us**.

4. Finally, note that Jesus envisions the time of "**the Lord's favour**" (v.19) Curiously, Jesus' omitted the reference to vengeance in Isaiah 61. Instead, he highlights the allusion to Moses' **year of Jubilee**. Every 50 years the Law of Moses required **all prisoners must be released** from captivity. Jesus' arrival on earth is the **ultimate year of Jubilee**. He

comes to facilitate a humanity as an open, harmonious community with God and one another. That's God's vision!

The gospel is **about freedom and favour**. This is the kind of world Jesus came to establish among us. It is the trajectory for humanity that **God has set in motion** thanks to the cross of Christ.

This is **the mission and message** Jesus has entrusted to the Church. If these verses form a manifesto for Jesus' life and mission, they equally provide a framework for our how we should seek to spread His Gospel.

St Michaels North Carlton January 2021