

Sermon: Isaiah 61:1-6; Luke 4:14-30

Many years ago, I visited Nazareth, the very town where Jesus grew up and where he stood up to speak in the synagogue that day we heard about in our Gospel reading. Nazareth is a busy bustling majority Arab town, but in the middle of it is this enormous Christian Church. It's built right on top of the tiny old house where Gabriel is believed to have visited Mary. It's a very imposing building, if you like that sort of thing. It's very churchy too: behind the high altar there's a big picture full of bishops and cardinals.

What you see in Nazareth you see across Israel. Wherever some significant event in the gospel story is supposed to have taken place, someone has got the urge to build a Church there. To me it speaks of the instinct we have to want to set special events, and special people, in concrete, to institutionalise them.

But is this instinct to institutionalise right? Or to put it another way, what did Jesus come to do? Did he come to found an institution - or to start a revolution? It's a critical question for those who are called to exercise specific ministries within his church. So it's a critical question for David of course - but it's a critical question for us all, as well. What did Jesus come to do? Did he come to found an institution - or to start a revolution? Judging by people's reactions in Nazareth it was the latter: people tend to be much more at ease with institutions than revolutions. Institutions are stabilising; revolutions are upsetting: that's why they tried to throw him off a cliff at the end of the story.

And yet at first, Jesus makes a very positive first impression on them. Our passage begins with these words: *Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.* This is, after all, the local Galilee boy made good, and nowhere was more local to him than his hometown, Nazareth. Which is probably

why he's given the honour of reading in the synagogue. And what he chooses to read is the passage from Isaiah we heard as our first reading. It's a passage full of significant echoes from Israel's past - and to understand it properly, we need to understand what those echoes are, so let me take a moment to explain them. There are three things we need to note.

First of all although these are the words of Isaiah, they are really the words of the Messiah. Jesus says, '*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me.*' The word translated 'anointed' is directly related to the word 'Christ' which is simply the Greek word for 'Messiah', or anointed one. So when Jesus says '*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me.*' he could just as well have said '*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has Messiah-ed me.*' The revolutionary agenda that Jesus is announcing is the agenda of no less a person than the Lord's Messiah; the anointed one of God; the one on whom his Spirit rests

The second echo we need to hear is an echo from the exile. What Isaiah was announcing in the passage Jesus read was the end of the exile. The captives and the oppressed, the people in need of saving, were the exiles in Babylon. Now to many in Jesus' day the exile was still continuing. Yes, they were back in the land, but no, they were not free, not while they were subject to Roman rule. Judea was perhaps the most rebellious of all Roman provinces, because the people of Israel were still longing for the end of exile and were not afraid to take action to bring the exile to an end.

The third echo we need to hear is one that points us back beyond the exile, beyond Isaiah, way back to Leviticus and the rules for the year of Jubilee, that year when debts would be cancelled and slaves released. The year of Jubilee – '*the year of the Lord's favour*' in Isaiah's words - was never actually practised in OT

history, but it remained a powerful symbol to the people in Jesus' day. The first thing the rebels did in the Jewish War in AD66 was to burn the Treasury where the records of debt were kept. It wasn't just an act of vandalism: they saw their actions as being all of a piece with the year of Jubilee - the year of liberation. It was a sign of liberation, and of *revolution*.

So when Jesus reads out these words these three ideas crowd together - of release for the captives and cancellation of debts; of the end of exile; and of the coming of the Messiah. And then Jesus says, v. 21 *"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."* And that is actually his sermon – those eight words. He sits down to say that, because in the synagogue you stood to read but you sat to preach. And that's his very short sermon. Shorter than this one, I'm afraid. But short though it is, it's packed full of meaning. Jesus takes these three powerful ideas from the past and focuses them on the present; he focuses them, in fact, on himself. When he read the words, *'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me'* he wasn't reading Isaiah's words, so much as reading a script prepared for him centuries before. He's the one Isaiah was referring to. Without a shadow of a doubt Jesus is saying that he is the Messiah, and through him the exile will end and the year of Jubilee will come. He's saying, *'I'm the one you've been waiting for; I'm the one through whom God's revolution is going to come.'*

Now that's pretty revolutionary disturbing stuff, and yet initially at least Jesus' hearers greet what he says very positively - v. 22 says *All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips*. Why such a positive reaction, when later they want to throw him off the cliff? Well maybe they were in the market for revolution - as long as it was a revolution on their own terms, one that overturned others, rather than themselves. When they heard Jesus speak they saw themselves as the poor, as the captives,

as the blind, as the oppressed. In other words what Jesus had to say was - they thought - good news for them - they were going to gain from this revolution that Jesus would bring.

So at this point Jesus seems to go out of his way to win not their approval, but their *disapproval*, and their downright hostility. How does he do that? He takes two steps to turn the tables on them.

First he draws a contrast between Nazareth, up in the hill country of Galilee, and Capernaum, down by the lake. Capernaum, he says, is a place where miracles are likely to happen. But Nazareth is not. It's hardly a favourable comparison. He's deliberately insulting the city that had raised him.

But that's just a curtain raiser for the second step Jesus takes to produce their hostility. He goes on to draw an even more unfavourable comparison, not between two Jewish towns, but between Jews and Gentiles. He deliberately takes two OT stories in which God's favour is focused not on his own people, but on people right outside the covenant, on despised Gentiles, on the widow from Zarephath in Lebanon, and on Naaman the Syrian.

Why does Jesus draw attention to these stories? Because he wants to challenge his hearers' assumptions, he wants to *revolutionise* his hearers' assumptions – as indeed he does ours. He's raising the question of who this revolution he's just announced is *for*, of whose side he's on. Jesus is deliberately overturning, revolutionising, the positive first impressions of those who are listening to him. His revolution is *not* for the people they expect it's for - it's not in other words for *them*. He's saying that it's other people, not them, who are the focus of God's love, care and attention.

Given all that, it's hardly surprising that the crowd reacts as they do and try to throw him off the cliff. The crowd turn the tables on Jesus, because he's turned the tables completely on them. He's revolutionised and turned upside down their ideas of the revolution that God's Messiah is going to bring. And he's tried to turn upside down their view of themselves, but they just won't have it.

But what on earth has all that got to do with us today? What does it have to do with David, and his new ministry amongst you as your Rector? And what does it have to do with the mission and ministry of these churches in the beautiful Itchen Valley? What does it mean for you each individually – and of course I include Rachel too in that. I want to draw two strands out from this for us to chew on.

First of all, we must recognise that Jesus good news is revolutionary. It turns people upside down, it turns expectations upside down, it comforts the disturbed yes, but it also disturbs the comfortable. The gospel of Jesus Christ is good news – of course, that's what 'gospel' means - but it's only really good news if first we recognise that it's rather *bad* news, that it's disturbing; that it's revolutionary. That's what people in Nazareth couldn't cope with. We need to ask whether we can. There's a huge temptation we face in the church today to domesticate Jesus, to make sure we've got him on our side, to deal with all our challenges and frustrations and all the petty niggles life throws our way. All too easily we find that we use him as an insurance policy and as a security blanket.

But it is not in his plan for him to be domesticated by his. His plan is not that he should be domesticated, but that we should be revolutionised: that David and Rachel should be; that I should be; that we all should be. We have to face the fact that the Kingdom he came to bring is an upside down sort of thing, a revolutionary thing in which, in the words of the Mary's song, rulers are brought down from their thrones

but the humble are lifted up. The hungry are filled with good things but the rich are sent away empty. So for us that means quite simply that if we want to be on the receiving end of God's love, we need to go a step further than the Nazareth crowd and let Jesus overturn our sometimes over-positive and unrealistic ideas about ourselves, so we can see ourselves as we really are, as those who are needy, poor, imprisoned, blind and oppressed. We have to learn how much we truly need him, how lost we are without him, and learn day by day to trust him and depend upon him. We have to know in the depths of our being that without him our lives are simply upside down, and we have to be revolutionised by him so that they can be turned the right way up. We have to be revolutionised by him so that we stop living for ourselves and start living for him and for his world. And that revolution doesn't happen once but every day. Every day, we have to come afresh to him, and ask him to lift us up, dust us off, put us back the right way round so we can live for him, love him and serve him. And none of us, David included, can have any effective ministry without that.

Secondly, if our lives are being revolutionised by Jesus, then we need to make sure that we live revolutionary lives. We must let the gospel turn us upside down, we must let it truly convert us, we must let it revolutionise us, so that it turn us into revolutionaries. To be involved in God's mission is to become a revolutionary, it's to be involved in his work of turning the world upside down - or rather turning it back the right way up. We're anointed by the Holy Spirit just as Jesus was to do just what Jesus did. We've been anointed by the Holy Spirit – which is to say we've been chosen by the Spirit, 'messiah-ed', even, by the Spirit to do just what Jesus did, to allow his Spirit to minister through us. So we too – David, each of us, and all of us - are to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and

recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour - to declare the revolution of God that he has made real in Jesus Christ.

Now I realise that the Itchen Valley might not be the most obvious setting for a revolution. In some ways it is the epitome of an English idyll. But this place needs the revolution of God no less than anywhere else. And that means that this place needs you to be revolutionaries, under David's leadership. You need together, under David's leadership, to play your part in God's wonderful work of turning the world upside down – or rather, of turning it back the right way up, under Jesus' just and gentle rule.

So today, at this great moment of a fresh new start, after some years which have certainly not always been easy, make this moment one of a fresh commitment, to give all that you have and all that you are for the coming Kingdom. Serve the revolution of God, in the power of God's enabling, anointing, equipping, empowering Holy Spirit. Serve the revolution of God for Jesus' sake; that his Kingdom may come, here on earth, here in the Itchen Valley, just as it is in heaven, for the glory of his holy name. Amen.