

As we get older, we Christians can tend to default to two positions – the first is that things are getting worse, the Church is shrinking, the congregations are getting older, we don't have the energy to do mission, to raise money to repair the roof and so on. The second is thank goodness we have got heaven to look forward to, no more aches and pains, no more of those things we could do without.

And it is not a question of either or, rather it is both and. We default to both positions simultaneously. We look back with regret at the past and look forward to a point that we generally hope won't come along too soon. Equally, we can romanticise the past and be anxious about the future

Unfortunately for us, Jesus isn't that interested in either the past or the future. When he speaks in his hometown synagogue of Nazareth for what we assume is the first time, his listeners are all agog to hear what this local boy had to say, because he has gained something of a reputation around Galilee.

He reads what would have been the extremely well-known prophecy of Isaiah that the captives would be released, the blind would see, the oppressed would be set free and the poor would receive good news.

Then he sits down, and instead of offering some words of comfort to his listeners about how God would eventually rescue Israel or talking about the past and the great days of Isaiah himself or Moses or Abraham he has the temerity to say – Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but today.

Really, Jesus? Really? Can't you see what is going on all around you? Haven't you heard the news? We're oppressed by the Romans, our friends and neighbours are being locked up, the poor are starving, the blind can't see. Are you seriously telling us this is the year of the Lord's favour?

What's changed today? In reality, nothing much. Palestinians still feel oppressed, Israelis fear for their very existence. Globally, violence, abuse, corruption, greed, oppression continue more or less unabated. Rights that are taken for granted in the Western world are laughed at elsewhere. On the plus side, proportionately there's probably less poverty and healthcare is greatly improved in large parts of the world

Is 2022 really the year of the Lord's favour? COVID is still rampant, the NHS is on its knees, we're in a race against time to avert a climate change disaster, the plight of refugees is worsening, increasing levels of depression, Eastern Europe potentially on the verge of war. The list seems almost endless.

And yet, Jesus' words are as true today as they were then. Jesus lives in us today through the grace and power of his Holy Spirit.

American Episcopalian theologian Diana Butler Bass says “‘today’ places us in the midst of the sacred drama, reminding us that we are actors and agents in God’s desire for the world. Today is the most radical thing Jesus ever said.”

Jesus is telling us, just as he told his Nazareth listeners, see the spirit of God at work right now, today, that God is with us, that God is keeping his promises, even if outwardly everything is looking unpromising. Jesus is calling us to look beyond the immediate injustice, the evil, the sin, to the love and compassion that is also all around us.

And our Nehemiah reading points to the same thing – pay attention to now, to today. Nehemiah has overseen the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and invited the people to come to an assembly where the prophet Ezra reads from the law of Moses. And their reaction is both to worship and to weep.

Yet they were told to go away and rejoice and feast because the presence of God was with them that very day. It’s not that the people were living in a happy ever after situation. Far from it, their recent past was one of trauma and loss, they were newly returned from exile, the rest of their homeland was still in ruins and their future was unclear.

But by listening intently to the word of God, recited to them over several hours, they were transformed. No doubt they were weeping with gratitude at their return to Jerusalem, but equally I suspect they were also weeping over what must have seemed to them as God’s silence. And weeping too over their sins and weeping in mourning for all that they had lost.

Luckily God’s word encompasses all of that, even blesses all of it. You can find all of those emotions in just the Psalms, even if you never read any other part of the Bible.

What matters for us as a church is that Jesus turns to Scripture to give us all the clues we need about his identity and his purpose. He doesn’t need some shiny new mission statement, instead he emphasises that God’s word is alive. Somehow that seems to offend his listeners, or is it more a question of the time-honoured Scottish phrase ‘I kent his faither’?

Or perhaps more likely is that what they **really** don’t like is that Jesus is challenging them to change now – and we are often uncomfortable with change, we don’t want our boundaries and traditions altered. For it to be good news, we have to admit that life hasn’t necessarily been good to us, admit what we find difficult and hard., admit that we are not who we want to be and probably never will be. Just by admitting the truth to ourselves can bring a real sense of freedom.

Yet Jesus is telling us – your freedom is available right now, today, if you want it. Hang on a second, that’s tough. Think of the rich young ruler. Yet also think of Zacchaeus, transformed in an instant by his encounter with Jesus.

So how do we accept that God's promises are fulfilled today, when we look at the world around us? It's hard, isn't it, to look beyond the never-ending litany of bad news and try to see what God is up to, try to see signs of the kingdom breaking in when all seems a diet of disaster.

And thinking of all those huge issues that need dealing with why would God bother with little old me? Well, at heart that is what God does. He bothers with little old you and little old me.

Because I'm sure Jesus knows fine well that it's not just others who are the captives who need to be set free from their chains, their addictions. It's us too, it's you and me, we're all oppressed and blind too in our different ways. As it says in the hymn we've just sung long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night, and then goes on I woke, my chains fell off, my heart was free. I rose, went forth and followed thee. That's what Jesus offers us today and every day.

It's all very well helping others to be free from their chains but allowing others to help us be free from ours is quite a different matter. It takes a lot of courage to confront our stinking thinking, and we're good at putting it off. I'd get a gold medal for procrastination, but I'm not sure about getting one for anything else.

And it's even harder to imagine what we might do to break that cycle of negative thinking when we may well think that we're not up to much, that just as Paul was talking about in our Corinthians reading, we feel we're a bit like that part of the body that nobody really thinks about, or perhaps a bit like a stubbed toe, something that doesn't really contribute.

But Paul reminds us that the body is designed to work as a whole, not as individual disjointed parts. What sort of body would we be if we were all ears, all eyes or worse still all mouth?

No, God has given us all different gifts and the whole is more than the sum of the parts. In any face-to-face discipleship course such as Alpha, for example, the person doing the washing up after the meal is as important as the table host and as important as the speaker. Different gifts – given by the same God – different responsibilities, but it wouldn't be as effective, or even happen at all, without all three working together. Each of us matters.

In conclusion, as I said earlier, Jesus used Isaiah's prophecy as his mission statement. From that fateful Sabbath in the synagogue until the day he died on the Cross Jesus lived out that mission statement day by day.

A mission statement that is good enough for Jesus is good enough for us too. And whether we like it or not we are now God's agents for change in this broken world, we are the bringers of good news, we are God's hands and feet, mouth and ears – today and every day. We are all the body of Christ.

So perhaps we need to rewrite Isaiah's prophecy slightly.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me (and therefore also with you), because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us 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. Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing.

Our challenge is simple – how are we going to fulfil Isaiah's prophecy today and every day?