

SERMON – 26/1/25
'Today is the Day'

Luke 4:14-21

“Jesus went to Nazareth where He had been brought up, and on the Sabbath He went into the synagogue, as was His custom. He stood up to read and the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. Unrolling it, He found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.'" (Luke 4:16-18)

As we continue our journey through the season of Epiphany, exploring examples of when Jesus was revealed to be the Messiah, the Son of God, we come this morning to the first of two readings about a visit He made to His home synagogue in Nazareth.

I actually preached on this passage just last May (on Pentecost Sunday) when we focussed on the anointing of Jesus by the Holy Spirit and the calling we share with Christ (by the anointing of the same Holy Spirit) to proclaim the Good News of God's Kingdom to a needy world. So this morning I want to take a different focus and explore with you how it is we might discern when something is being revealed to us by God and when we are trying consciously and rationally to work things out for ourselves or even when we are just having an idle day-dream or a flight of fancy.

Following His baptism at the Jordan (and the account of His temptations in the wilderness which we will come back to in a few weeks), Jesus' ministry is now beginning to get underway. We're not given much by way of detail but it is clear that He has begun preaching across the towns and villages of Galilee and that people have begun to take notice of Him. In this morning's reading He comes to His home town of Nazareth and probably does there what He has done in other places across the region by making Himself known to the synagogue leader as someone who might be asked to do some of the Scripture readings at the Sabbath service and to bring a message rather like a visiting preacher might do in our context.

In many ways, a 1st century synagogue service would not be all that dissimilar to one of our church services, except that it would

have lasted several hours with the earlier part of the service taken up with prayer and the public reading of the Scriptures, firstly from Law of Moses, then from the Prophets and Writings before one or more people would then be invited to teach and and preach. It is in this context that Jesus both reads from the prophecy of Isaiah and then addresses the congregation.

What is unusual about this episode, of course, is that when Jesus preaches, He applies the Bible verses He has just read to *Himself* – “Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (v.21) – And as we'll see next week this causes outrage in Nazareth. But I neither do I want to steal any thunder from next week nor do I want to return to the actual content of the prophecy that He reads from and speaks about but rather to look at *how* the process of listening for God's Word took place and what we might have to learn from it for ourselves as individuals and as a church.

A very long time ago now when I was a teenager attending communicants classes in the Manse in Dunblane in preparation for making a public profession of faith in Christ and joining the church, our minister talked us through the vows of church membership. I particularly remember the words of one of the vows because it was couched in somewhat old-fashioned language and our minister was at pains to explain what it actually meant. The question was: 'Do you promise to make diligent use of the means of grace?'

Now the wording has been updated a bit in recent years. It's been made into two questions in fact: 'Do you promise to join regularly with your fellow Christians on the Lord's Day?' And 'Do you promise to be faithful in reading the Bible and in prayer?' Because, put more plainly, that is what that phrase 'the means of grace' refers to – prayer, Bible reading and public worship – crucial aspects of Christian discipleship which we neglect at our peril.

And it seems to me that what we have in our reading this morning is an extremely good example of why these means of grace are important, because they give us insight into what the Lord Jesus Himself did in practice to enable Him to be open to the Father's prompting.

The first thing to point out, although it is really very obvious and you will doubtless have heard preachers mention it before, is that Jesus 'on the Sabbath day went into the synagogue *as was His custom*' (v16). If it was important for God's Son to make a habit of attending weekly public worship with God's people, then it must surely be a significant part of our being disciples of Jesus that we follow Him in that practice. It's worth saying that we are not doing this in the quest for some kind of gold star each week that we can store up like celestial tokens to earn us rewards but rather to draw spiritual benefit from the things that happen when God's people gather now as in Jesus' day – from the blessings of joining in public prayer, of the preaching of God's Word, of fellowship with other pilgrims on the journey of faith and of sharing in the Lord's Supper. These are the means of grace that wonderfully draw us closer to God, to a deeper understanding of the ways of His Kingdom and to the discernment of our particular part in the unfolding of God's purposes in the world. So if you want to seek the revelation of God's will, begin right here by developing a practice of commitment to the weekly worship and fellowship of God's people, for it is in that context (as any regular churchgoer will tell you) that you will increasingly find those God-given light-bulb moments that will illuminate your path.

But as a background to that public expression of our shared faith, let me encourage you to develop your own personal experience of the means of grace by developing a practice of prayer and of reading the Bible in intimate conversation with your heavenly Father. Here again in this morning's reading there are a couple of significant details that help give us a steer on how we should be doing that.

We are told that when Jesus stood up in the synagogue to read the Scriptures, He was *handed* the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. In other words it was someone else who determined what He was going to read from that particular day. It is not known whether there was a pattern of set readings in the synagogues of First Century Israel or whether it was the local leaders who decided in what order the Bible was to be read. Either way, it's the same for us – there *are* lectionaries available that some churches always follow and some follow from time to time; and there are also

other ways to read the Scriptures systematically to ensure a balanced diet of teaching across the months and years, rather than just dipping in randomly to this or that favourite passage on a week by week basis hand to mouth. And reading plans and Bible notes are also available for individuals to use in personal devotions to the same end. I have lost count of the number of times over the years that in the providence of God either in my own personal Bible reading or in working through a preaching plan of some kind that God has spoken clearly and powerfully into a particular set of circumstances at a particular moment by arresting me by a passage or verse or word from that day's reading. It has been quite literally a word from the Lord. But you are not going to get that with anything like the same force and significance unless you are following some kind of Bible reading scheme. 'The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him.'

But by the same token we also discover in our reading this morning that upon being handed the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah, Jesus Himself *found* the place where it was written about Him, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me" (v18). And that of course also says something about His familiarity with the Scriptures, that He could turn to a particular verse from what He had been given that morning to apply God's Word appropriately for that very moment in that particular place. And that is also a challenge to each of us. How well-versed are you in the Bible? How well do you know your way around it? How confident are you that you can find what you know is there with relative ease? We don't expect infants to remain spoon-fed into childhood, never mind adulthood, in fact we would be rightly critical of parents who didn't allow their kids to grow up, and yet we are much more lax when it comes to developing dietary and feeding skills when it comes to the bread of life, the Word of God.

So what I want to do this morning is to exhort you as my minister did me the best part of half a century ago to 'make diligent use of the means of grace.' Be faithful at public worship, engaging with the preaching of God's Word, joining regularly at the Lord's Table, taking time to cultivate faith-deepening fellowship with other believers. Make time to pray both alone and with other people, for without God we can do nothing but

with Him all things are possible. Take the Bible off the shelf and read it – alone and with others. If its pages are too thin or its print too small don't be sentimental about the fact that it was the one your granny gave you in nineteen canteen. Or if the reason you haven't opened it for so long is because you've always struggled with that translation, get yourself a new one and let its words sing to you. Develop yourself a spiritual diet of square meals every day and just see what God will reveal to you.

“Jesus went into the synagogue, *as was His custom*. He stood up to read and the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah was *handed* to Him. Unrolling it, He *found* the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.'”

It wouldn't surprise me in the slightest to discover that the Spirit of the Lord will be on you too and you will find yourself anointed to preach good news to the poor, sent to proclaim freedom for prisoners and sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free and declare the year of the Lord's favour. Now is the time of God's favour, writes Paul. Today is the day of salvation.

And God will build His Church.