

The revolutionary message of Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] Today's reading is from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 4, verses 14 to 30, and that's on page 1036, page 1036 in the Church Bibles, Luke, chapter 4, verses 14 to 30.

And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country, and he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and, as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and 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 proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

[1 : 1 2] And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

And all spoke well of him and marvelled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, Is not this Joseph's son? And he said to them, Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, Physician, heal yourself.

What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well. And he said, Truly I say to you, No prophet is acceptable in his hometown.

But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land. And Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow.

And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian. When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath, and they rose up and drove him out of the town, and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff.

[2 : 3 4] But passing through their midst, he went away. Well, we're starting a new series of sermons this morning, looking at Luke chapters four and five, with this title, A Manifesto to Change the World.

So before we look at Luke's gospel together, why don't I pray and ask for God's help in understanding his word. Let's pray together. Forever, O Lord, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens.

Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed, that you are unchanging, and therefore your word is unchanging, eternal, fixed, in the heavens.

And we pray therefore this morning, please would you help us to give ourselves to understanding your eternal word. We pray that your Holy Spirit would open our eyes to understand it, and then to be those who not only hear it and grasp it, but to live it.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, please do turn then to that reading from Luke chapter four, on page 1036. Well, I've been reflecting on that title, A Manifesto to Change the World.

[3 : 52] And at one level, of course, it's pretty cheesy, isn't it? Simply because it's what every manifesto would have us believe, whether Marx or Obama or Corbyn or May.

We're going to bring change. We're going to change the world. Well, the Manifesto of Jesus Christ, which we're looking here this morning in Luke chapter four, is the one manifesto that really has delivered, and really has changed the world, dramatically so, over the last 2,000 years or so.

So we have the enormous privilege this morning of looking at it together, from the lips of Jesus Christ himself, and then over the next few weeks, as this manifesto is then worked out in the ministry of the Lord Jesus himself.

And therefore, I think these are some of the kinds of questions which we should be asking ourselves over these next few weeks. Have I rightly understood Jesus' manifesto?

Or have I misunderstood it? Am I on board with Jesus' manifesto in my own life, such that it really grips me and is transforming me?

[5 : 02] Are we collectively on board with Jesus' manifesto as a local church, such that we don't all have sort of different agendas doing different things, but actually we are all completely lined up behind the manifesto of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Now, I don't know about you, but those are just the kind of questions I need to be asking at the beginning of September. The summer's almost over. Another year, academic year, church year, lies ahead.

It's the opportunity, isn't it, for us to have a spiritual health check, so to speak. Individually, yes, but corporately together as well as a local church.

Because remember that Luke writes his gospel to give us confidence and certainty about Jesus. Just turn to the outline there on the insert inside the song sheet.

Luke chapter 1, verse 4. Luke writes, he says, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. I hope we found that in our growth groups, that we've been growing in certainty as we've been studying Luke's gospel over the last year or so, growing in confidence.

[6 : 11] And yet, as we'll see today, Jesus' manifesto is easily and frequently misunderstood. Not simply in the world out there, so to speak, but so often in churches as well.

Well, the passage divides into two parts. They're reflected on the headings. First of all, we're going to think about the gospel that Jesus proclaimed. And then we're going to think about the rejection that Jesus endured.

First of all, the gospel that Jesus proclaimed. Look at verses 14 and 15. And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country, and he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.

Now, this is the point at which Jesus' public ministry begins. So far in Luke, Luke has told us that Jesus is God's King, God's everlasting King, whose kingdom will last forever, who will bring God's long-promised salvation and the forgiveness of sins.

If you want to catch up with some of the sermons in Luke 1-4, they're all on our website so that you can do that. And therefore, I wonder if you can sense something of the enormous anticipation, as Luke writes, verses 16 and 17.

[7 : 34] As Jesus comes to Nazareth, as he goes to the synagogue, as he stands up, as the scroll is handed to him, as he reads from it, as he then hands the scroll back, he sits down.

And then verse 21, in a moment of great drama, he says, today, today, the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Quoting from Isaiah, in the Old Testament, Isaiah 61, he says, that which God has promised in the past, today, is the day it's been delivered and fulfilled.

notice verse 18, it's good news. It's the word from which we get our word, gospel. It's a good news message that Jesus is bringing in fulfillment.

And notice, too, verse 18, it is good news to the poor. Now, over the last 80 years or so, there have been whole movements in the Christian world that have claimed that what Jesus is talking about here is the economically poor.

Under the label of liberation theology, which originally came from Roman Catholic theologians in South America, they have argued that Jesus had a bias to the poor and to the socially downtrodden.

[8 : 57] And therefore, the task of Christian mission is to bring justice to the poor through political and social action. And the legacy of that is seen in the countless churches today which put social justice and ministries of mercy and seeking to transform the city and all those kinds of things at the very heart of their mission statements.

However, that is to misunderstand what Jesus means by good news to the poor. And in order to see that, what I wanted to do is to spend some time this morning asking the question, who are the poor that Isaiah, here is Jesus quoting from Isaiah in verses 18 and 19, who are the poor that Isaiah is talking about?

Because that's going to be the key to understanding the nature of the gospel that Jesus Christ proclaimed. So stick your service sheet in Luke 4 and turn back to Isaiah chapter 1.

Isaiah chapter 1, we've got four very brief passages to look at in Isaiah, so it's worth flicking back there, on page 683. Isaiah chapter 1, page 683.

And here, in summary, is the problem that the whole book of Isaiah, the biggest book in the Old Testament, the whole book of Isaiah addresses. Isaiah chapter 1, verses 2 to 4.

[10 : 28] God's people have turned their backs on him. Verse 2, Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord has spoken. Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me.

The ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know. My people do not understand. Our sinful nation are people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly.

They have forsaken the Lord. They have despised the Holy One of Israel. They are utterly estranged. God's people have rebelled against him.

They have forsaken him. And in response, God says that he will bring judgment against them. We saw something of this last summer, if you were around last summer, for our series on the first few chapters of Isaiah, but turn for now to Isaiah chapter 29 on page 712.

Here, in summary, is the judgment that God says he's going to bring against his people. Isaiah chapter 29, verse 3. And I will encamp against you all rounds and will besiege you with towers and I'll raid siege works against you and you will be brought low.

[11 : 55] God's people will be attacked. There was indeed a siege in 587 BC. This was fulfilled as the mighty Babylonian army besieged and attacked the city of Jerusalem.

God's people were indeed brought low, oppressed, sent off as slaves into captivity. Indeed, verse 10, spiritually blinded, no longer able to see the truth about God.

But then move on to Isaiah chapter 40. Isaiah chapter 40 marks the turning point of the book, the beginning of the second half of the book, as God declares pardon and forgiveness for his people.

Page 724. You may remember these were the very words that John the Baptist quotes as he starts his ministry to introduce himself and the Lord Jesus who will come after him.

Isaiah chapter 40, verse 1. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned.

[13 : 06] And then in the following few chapters we see that it's through God sending his spirit-filled servant who will die for the sins of his people that this forgiveness will be possible.

And then last reference in Isaiah, Isaiah chapter 61. Here then, we get to the chapter that Jesus quotes from. This is the final section of Isaiah and Isaiah chapter 61 lies in the very middle of this final section.

Isaiah 61, verses 1 and 2. The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who abound, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

It is a beautiful promise. And therefore, you see, back in Luke chapter 4, as Jesus stands up and quotes from Isaiah chapter 61, we now know, don't we, who Jesus is talking about, what he means by this good news to the poor.

[14 : 24] He is proclaiming good news to all those who are experiencing the judgment of God, just as Isaiah was in his day.

All those who are blinded to the truth about God, who are in captivity, who are oppressed by their enemies, poor, spiritually poor.

I take it that is all of us, what all of us are naturally like, whether we are economically well off or economically less well off, before the sovereign holy God, all of us are poor, spiritually speaking, captive, people.

In other words, when Jesus announces good news to the poor, we are not to imagine that here is some Che Guevara figure bringing in a social and political revolution. If we did, then I presume we would conclude that in prosperous Dulwich, his message has no relevance whatsoever.

driver. I had an email from a friend last week who was describing a bus journey he had been on where the driver had unexpectedly stopped before explaining to the passengers that this was a new route, he didn't know where to go and he was going to have to phone up his supervisor.

[15 : 40] Well, he called the office, advice was given. Further advice apparently was simultaneously and as you can imagine rather noisily given by fellow passengers who sort of gathered around the driver at the front of the bus.

I guess one person saying we should go this way, someone else, no, I want to go over there because my house is down there and so on. But rather than following the direction of the passengers, he listened to his supervisor and drove on.

I guess it's the issue isn't it of who you listen to? Other people or our culture or even church leaders as they tell us what they think the message of Jesus Christ is?

Or do we listen to Jesus himself as he tells us what his message is, what his gospel is? Notice, will you, that Jesus' understanding here of what the gospel is, of the gospel he proclaimed, fits perfectly with what Luke has already shown us in his gospel.

Back in chapter 1 verse 77, Zechariah, he's full of praise to God because he knows that the time has come when God will bring the forgiveness of sins.

[16 : 54] In chapter 3 verse 3 it's how John the Baptist begins his ministry proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It would be rather odd, wouldn't it, then, if we came to Luke chapter 4 and Jesus stood up in the synagogue and announced a program of social justice and political change.

likewise, as we move on ahead through the rest of Luke's gospel, why, who are some of the poor that Jesus has come for?

Well, in our reading today, we have the widow in Zarephath who no doubt she was poor, but in the very next verse we have Naaman, the wealthy, powerful Syrian general.

In chapter 5, verses 1 to 11, which we'll come to in two weeks' time, the Simon the fisherman running his own business. And over the page in chapter 5, verses 27 to 32, there is Levi, the tax collector, and whatever you think of him, he was certainly not poor.

He was rich, he has his own house, he can put on a big party for his friends. And why does Jesus say he's come? Chapter 5, verse 32, he says, not to bring social and economic justice, but to call sinners to repentance.

[18 : 13] Indeed, it's that same message that at the end of Luke, Jesus commissions his disciples to take to all nations. I put Luke chapter 24, verses 46 and 47 there on the outline, where Jesus says right at the end of Luke's gospel, thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead and that repentance and the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations.

the gospel that Jesus proclaimed. Well, secondly, the rejection that Jesus endured, because just as verses 14 to 21 is a summary of the gospel Jesus proclaimed, so in verses 22 to 30, Luke gives us a summary of the rejection that Jesus endured, a heads up, if you like, of one of the significant features of his ministry.

I don't know if you noticed this when the passage was read to us earlier by Lizzie, how very striking it is, how quickly opinion turned against Jesus. So verse 15, have a look at it, he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.

Verse 20, all spoke, sorry, verse 22, all spoke well of him, and yet, verse 28, they were filled with wrath, and verse 29, they attempt to kill him.

Is that not extraordinary? Familiarity breeds contempt. I've reached the stage in life when one or two of those I knew at school or university have achieved greatness in some field or another, and occasionally you see them in the sort of public realm, so perhaps in the media or business or politics or something like that.

[20 : 01] And I kind of sit there as I see them on the telly or see their photograph in the newspaper. I kind of sit there just rather bewildered because I remember them as a sort of spotty schoolboy or as scruffy students.

And here they are suddenly, they're expecting to command my attention as I look at the media. Extraordinary. And that seems to be the issue here, doesn't it? Verse 22, is this not Joseph's son?

Familiarity breeds contempt. But Jesus knows just where that kind of thinking is going to take them. Verse 23.

And he sent to them doubtless, you'll quote to me this proverb, physician, heal yourself. What we've heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.

Soon they'll be saying to Jesus, prove yourself, perform miracles and signs for us at our convenience, such that, Jesus, you can fit in with our agenda. Now, Jesus isn't the first person in the Bible to be treated like that.

[21 : 10] In verses 24 to 28, Jesus reminds them of the prophets Elijah and Elisha. You can read about them in the Old Testament in 1 and 2 Kings. How hundreds of years earlier, God's historic people had turned their backs on God under King Ahab.

They wouldn't listen to God, they wouldn't listen to his prophets either, neither to Elijah nor to his successor, Elisha. And therefore, what did those two prophets do? Where did God send them?

Why, he sent them beyond the borders of historic Israel to, well, to a poor widow in Sidon, a nobody, and to a mighty general of the Syrian army, a somebody.

Now, that, if you like, is a preview in the Old Testament testament of the trajectory that then continued into Jesus' ministry. Rejected by God's historic people, by the political and religious establishments, by the people as a whole, indeed, three years later, these same crowds, why they're going to be clamoring for Jesus' death again, and that time, they got their way.

And yet, a trajectory whereby the message of Jesus will, like in the Old Testament Israel, go far beyond the borders of Israel and its people. Look again at that quote from the end of Luke's Gospel, from Luke 24 again.

[22 : 36] Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer, and on the third day rise from the dead, and the repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations.

All nations. Indeed, that some of us will remember when we looked at the book of Acts several years ago, that the way in which Luke structures the whole book of Acts is to show the Gospel going to the ends of the earth, to all nations.

The rejection that Jesus endured. Now, I don't know about you, but I don't think this is how I would have written Luke's Gospel. I think for me, having had Jesus standing up in the synagogue, proclaiming his manifesto, I think for me, I would have wanted to go straight to chapter 4, verse 31, where Jesus drives out a demon and people marvel at his authority.

I think I would have wanted to go straight to chapter 4, verse 40, where he heals all those who come to him. But Luke doesn't do that. Luke puts rejection right up front and central.

people. Because, you see, as Jesus reveals himself, as he reveals what he's like, as he reveals what he's come to do, while he's also revealing what is in people's hearts.

[23 : 58] As they go from a kind of vague approval of Jesus, who they don't really know and don't really understand, to beginning to understand his message and why he's come, and beginning to understand the implications for themselves of the gospel he proclaimed, why their hearts are revealed.

Our response to Jesus reveals our hearts. The gospel Jesus proclaimed, the rejection Jesus endured. Let me finish by asking one question, which, although one question has the most enormous implications.

Is Jesus' gospel our gospel? is it your gospel, personally? Is it our gospel as a local church?

It may be, of course, that you've never really heard this before. Or perhaps you've given mild approval to the fact that Jesus came for the poor, without ever really considering for yourself the fact that you are one of the poor that Jesus came for.

Perhaps, even now, there's a sense in which your heart is rejoicing. Because as you look at yourself, you see someone who, regardless of how other people see you, you know that you are spiritually poor, blind, oppressed, and in need of the forgiveness that Jesus came to bring.

[25 : 31] Perhaps you're beginning to see why Christianity, far from being boring and irrelevant and so often portrayed, is indeed, verse 18, good news. In which case, please, will you come to the rest of this series of talks in Luke's Gospel, or talk to me or someone else afterwards about how you might come to enjoy and experience this forgiveness that Jesus Christ offers for yourself.

Of course, it may be that Jesus' manifesto has made you angry. In which case, please, will you then heed the warning here against wanting Jesus on your own terms?

A Jesus who fits in with your idea of who Jesus is and what his manifesto should be, rather than actually what Jesus says about himself.

In other words, don't reject him simply because as you get closer to him, that he's not really the kind of Jesus you thought he was going to be. I guess many of us will have friends who perhaps, you know, when we first met them, we thought a bit standoffish or didn't really take to them, but actually over time they've become great friends.

Perhaps one or two of us even married them. Get to know Jesus and understand him rather than simply having a kind of knee-jerk response and walking away from him.

[26 : 56] Or perhaps you've been in a church in the past where the minister hasn't really done their homework on Luke chapter 4, where they've suggested that Jesus came to bring about social and economic transformation, that he did indeed have a bias to the poor.

And then the ministry of that church you went to reflected that kind of bias. In which case, can I say, you need to recalibrate and instead get with Jesus' agenda.

Which is not to say the ministry of Jesus doesn't have social implications. It does. But his ministry is not first and foremost to meet social or physical needs.

Or maybe Jesus' gospel is your gospel. In which case, surely the great challenge is to keep it that way. That's certainly, I think, a challenge for us as a church.

Because, of course, our culture loves churches, doesn't it? Churches which are about helping the poor and marginalised and transforming the city into society. Who can argue with that kind of thing? It's what everyone wants, isn't it?

[28 : 05] But a church which proclaims that everyone is spiritually poor, everyone is spiritually blind, everyone is facing the judgment of God, is oppressed, even in a place like Dulwich, that everyone is in need as a saviour.

Why, I take it that a church like that can expect to endure opposition just as the Lord Jesus himself endured opposition. Likewise, as individuals, as we try and speak at work or at school or with friends and family about the needs to turn to Jesus for forgiveness, I take it, we can expect to endure opposition.

Which, of course, is why we need certainty that this really is the gospel. If we're not certain, then I take it we'll end up taking an easier option and proclaiming a different gospel.

Which will mean that we give up proclaiming what really is the best news in the world. That Jesus brings the forgiveness of sins, spiritual sight to know God, freedom from the judgment of God, freedom to enjoy the favour of God both in this life and the next.

All one for us through the death of Jesus Christ, the suffering servant for our sins. God's great favour to those who know they are undeserving.

[29 : 33] Just like the widow in Zarephath, just like Naaman, the general. They might both have assumed, you see, they were way beyond the kindness and favour of God.

But they weren't. It's a wonderful message. It really is good news. As Jesus says, it is a beautiful gospel. It is vital that you and I know what the gospel is.

But along with that certainty comes certainty that while many reject it, those who recognise their spiritual poverty will accept it and come to rejoice in the good news that Jesus brings.

Let's have a few moments quiet and then I shall lead us in prayer. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

Heavenly Father, we praise you very much for this glorious fulfilment in the Lord Jesus Christ as he fulfilled the promises of Isaiah, the promises of a saviour, God himself who will come to bring the forgiveness of sins, who will suffer and die for those who are undeserving.

[30 : 57] And we thank you Heavenly Father for this gospel that the Lord Jesus proclaimed. Thank you many of us for the experience of knowing your favour in our own lives.

And we pray Heavenly Father, please would you help us to hold on to this gospel individually as a local church, to be unafraid of proclaiming it.

And we pray that in your great mercy in this part of London, you would bring many to see their spiritual need and to put their trust in the Lord Jesus likewise.

And we ask it in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen.