

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 23rd January 2022
3rd Sunday of Epiphany

Collect

God of all mercy,
your Son proclaimed good news to the poor,
release to the captives,
and freedom to the oppressed:
anoint us with your Holy Spirit
and set all your people free
to praise you in Christ our Lord.

Amen.

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts.

Luke 4:14-21

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. 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 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.’

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

Sermon by John Richardson

It was a great joy to be part of the service last week when Theresa became Vicar of St Mary's. The service reminded me of the time when I began my ministry as curate of St Mary's Church in Chessington.

On the day when I was made deacon I had to stand in front of the congregation at St Mary's and recite what was known as the Declaration of Assent. This meant saying "I do solemnly make the following declaration - I assent to the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, to the Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests and Deacons, etc., etc.

Occasionally, I look at those Thirty-Nine Articles to remind myself of what I was assenting to. If you want to read them you will find them at the back of the Book of Common Prayer. If you are in the habit of reading before you go to sleep, I can think of no better cure for insomnia.

Here's what Article 2 says about Jesus:

"The Son, which is the Word of the Father, begotten from everlasting of the Father, the very and eternal God, and of one substance with the Father, took man's nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin, of her substance; so that two whole and perfect Natures, that is to say, the Godhead and the Manhood, were joined together in one person....." And so it goes on.

Now that takes a bit of unravelling, and that's just the beginning. There are another thirty eight of them. It would be interesting to know how the theologians would word those articles today.

More to the point, how do we understand such things? No doubt each of us would have different answers. When we read something or hear something, we each put our own interpretation on what we read or hear.

How do we interpret what people are saying to us? Statements by those who lead us in church or nation often lead to endless discussion about what actually was meant and how we should understand it.

We all have to choose our words carefully if we don't want to be misunderstood. We don't always say what we want to say, which leaves our words open to misinterpretation. Different interpretations can lead to misunderstandings. We can end up seeing things very differently from someone who has heard the same words.

Exactly the same thing happened in the time of Jesus. The words of Jesus are open to different interpretations. So much so that people often didn't understand what he was talking about.

And that's what happened in today's Gospel. Listen again to what he said:

"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...”

Those who knew their Bibles would know instantly that the words came from the book of the prophet Isaiah. But what did Jesus mean when he said “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”? In other words: “This is my mission, and my mission has been blessed by God.” This didn’t go down too well with some people.

This is how he sees his mission:

- it’s about bringing good news to the poor
- about releasing captives
- about recovery of sight to the blind
- about letting the oppressed go free

How you understand that will depend on who you are and what your circumstances are. Chances are that those listening to the scriptures in the synagogue would be people who thought of only one thing - deliverance from their oppressors which God had promised - who at this particular time would be the Romans.

So that’s what this is all about - being set free from oppression and persecution and domination by those who had no right to be in your country.

But this is not what Jesus meant. He comes to be among the poor, the outcast, the sinner, the sick, the blind, the downtrodden. He does indeed fulfil the scriptures, but not in the way people expected or wanted. So we can see why hostility arose to Jesus. It began because some people had read the scriptures in a different way. It began because some people saw the scriptures as a statement of God’s special relationship with them to the exclusion of others. They saw it as a promise of deliverance from their oppressors.

The kind of deliverance Jesus promised was quite different.

It wasn’t a promise to the chosen few.

It was a promise to everyone: a promise of liberation for all the poor and oppressed, regardless of nationality, gender, race.

Not surprising then that Jesus faced such opposition from his own people.

In today’s Gospel we see Jesus’ manifesto for his ministry.

It’s worth thinking about that manifesto:

- good news for the poor
- releasing captives
- the blind, the sick,
- the oppressed

It’s worth thinking about all the things we regard as important when it comes to our ministry and mission as followers of Jesus. Where and how do those things fit in and how much of our energy and effort doesn’t quite fit in at all?

Jesus was able to do what he did, because, as he said: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” We believe that same Spirit is still with us. It is what empowers us.

I prefer the word “grace.” Grace is God’s free gift to us. It is by the grace of God that we become what God calls us to be.

The grace of God is never subject to our limitations, or the boundaries of nation, church, class or race that we set up. We are instruments of God’s grace for others, but we are not free to set limits or decide who should receive that grace. The Gospel is radically inclusive, for it is about the grace of God freely given to all.

The Trappist monk Thomas Merton believed that grace was simply “the gift of God’s life to us.” That gift is at work in each one of us whether we recognise its presence or not.

It is what inspires us.

It is what enthuses us.

It is what motivates us to follow Jesus in caring for the poor, the sick, the oppressed and all who are in need.

As Thomas Merton says: “Grace is the means by which one wakes up to oneself, to God and to the world.”

Amen.