

Sermon – 27th January 2019 – 9.30 am

Picture the scene. It's about 30 years from now. Perhaps it's Ellie's birthday party. Or maybe wedding day. Or some other gathering. She stands up, everyone's quiet and she says: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to..."

To what, I wonder? To teach? To find a cure to cancer? To fight for justice? To be a good listener? To nurture a family?

And what about you? If you could choose the words that might encapsulate who you are, the only words that would communicate the essence of yourself, your life, your commitments, what would they be? It might sound like an almost impossible question, but it is absolutely central to our lives. What can be more important than taking time to explore what is at the core of our being, at the heart of our very selves. Who it is that God made us to be.

When Jesus stood up in the Temple that day, he was setting out his life's work. In our political world we are used, aren't we, to glossy manifestos, vision statements and the like. And we are equally used to not believing a word they tell us. I have a good friend who works for a company which has plastered on the walls "integrity, respect, passion, innovation." And of course we all know that we don't make the people within an organisation any of those things by writing it on the walls.

Which is where the gospel reading is so important. This is no manifesto, but rather a statement of God's purpose. And everything that we hear of Jesus's life hereafter shows us what it means for this scripture to be fulfilled. Listen to it once again:

Jesus 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.'

Everything that we see in the life of Jesus shows us what it means to seek to bring about social justice. To live a life dedicated to the poor and marginalised. To allow people to see clearly – both literally and indeed metaphorically. To show people truth.

It's fair to say that Jesus seemed well-equipped to know his God-given purpose – and you might feel a little daunted by the prospect in your own life. I'm not quite sure what I would have said if I had stood up aged 30 to define God's call on my life, but it definitely wouldn't have looked exactly like this. At that time I was just embarking on a career in teaching.

Yet even with his extraordinary clarity, even Jesus's life shows us that this was not a once-for-all revelation. In the verses immediately prior to this reading, he is in the wilderness, being challenged by the devil. For many of us, difficult times can help us to clarify what really matters. And taking time

out of the busyness of daily existence can also provide important space to make sense of the direction of our lives.

And even after this point, throughout his ministry, Jesus continues to be shaped by the people he encounters. Last week we heard about him turning water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana. It was his own mother who gave him the nudge to do that – he seemed pretty reluctant to begin with, thinking that his time had not yet come, but she thought otherwise. And we all know that mothers are often right. And later in the gospels Jesus's encounter with the Syrophenician woman challenges him to realise that his ministry is to Jew and gentile alike.

So if we don't necessarily feel confident to stand up now and declare the essence of ourselves, our lives and our commitments, perhaps we are able to recognise important moments that have shaped and defined us. People who have nurtured and encouraged us and helped us to see more of who we really are, the gifts we really have, the possible paths open to us.

Which brings us rather neatly back to Ellie. It's impossible for any of us to know where life will take her, but what we all know is that we are sharing her journey. There is a role for each one of us in walking alongside her, helping her to see all that God sees in her.

There are times that St. Paul and I are not best friends, but today's reading is one of his finest. He uses the metaphor of the body to remind us that we are not all made the same. And that there is a reason we are not all made the same – because it just wouldn't work if we were. He goes a step further, too. It's not just that we aren't all made the same, but also that there should be no sense that one is better than the other because of the way they are made. None of us would think of saying that our nose is better than our ears – they simply perform different functions, they are important and useful in different ways. And so it should be when we think of the parts each one of us play in the world. We are called to live as God made us, using the skills and gifts we have been given, rather than comparing ourselves with others.

Baptism is a sign of so much hope and possibility. None of us knows what life holds for Ellie. I'm sure her personality is starting to show itself, and as time goes by, you'll have ideas about what she might be suited to, where she seems to flourish and thrive best. What we do know is that she will be surrounded by God's love throughout, so that in the joys and the sorrows of life she will never be alone.

Amen