

BACKGROUND TO THE READING – 31 January 2016

Luke 4: 14-30

The reading overlaps with last week's account of Jesus' declaration in the synagogue that he was the long awaited Messiah spoken about by Isaiah.

As Andre said, Jesus was being radical and revolutionary and saying something completely new. Luke places this account near the beginning of Jesus' ministry and so he did not start out quietly and build up his message gradually, to those who heard him that day he declared that he was the one.

He upset the people by refusing to carry out any miracles in their town, saying that they would not honour him and recognise him because he had grown up in their midst.

And he upset them by saying that they would no longer be the chosen ones of God but rather the Son of God had come to bring salvation to all people. To the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

We are familiar with Jesus reaching out to Gentiles and the New Testament has many examples of God's grace towards the Gentiles. But the Old Testament scriptures also give clues to God's plans for those who are not of Israel.

Jesus refers to Elijah helping a widow during a time of famine, a widow not of Israel but an outsider from Sidon. Elijah was on the run from his enemies and he sought refuge in the home of this heathen widow and her son. She was willing to share her last food with him and he then stayed with her for two years, ensuring that God would provide daily food. And when her son died, Elijah called on the power of God to raise him from the dead. The Jews who heard Jesus speak would have known this story well and would fully realise what Jesus was saying. There were poor widows in Israel too but God did not send Elijah to them!

Similarly, they would have known about Elisha healing the skin condition of a Syrian called Naaman.

Jesus was heralding a new dawn, he was doing a new thing!

But to the Jews, this was blasphemy and Jesus must die! They took him out to a high place to throw him over the cliff. But it was not his time to die. What he had said might have been the first nail, not in his coffin but in the cross. But it was too soon, he still had much to do. And so we have that simple final verse that tells us he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

Much has been written about how that happened. Not many would escape once the local men of power and authority had decided they should be stoned to death or thrown over a cliff and they were clearly outraged at Jesus. Did God miraculously

put scales over the eyes of those around him so that he could walk away? Was there much squabbling when Jesus family and friends argued with the would-be executioners that he escaped in the confusion? “Was some kind of Star Trek like cloaking device thrown over Jesus to make him invisible? I've heard all these suggestions. But we do not know. What we do know is that Jesus lived under God's protection and he could not come to harm at that particular moment. He would go on to accomplish the new thing that God had planned for him and for the entire human race.

SERMON

This is the last day of January, the last day of the first month of the new year. How are our New Year resolutions getting along? I confess that I never make any because it is depressing when the resolutions are abandoned by the end of the first month. I make resolutions all the time throughout the year, some I keep and some I don't.

The New Year can be a refreshing time for some people, a time for fresh starts, for planning new things, there might seem to be endless opportunities lying ahead and an excitement in waiting to see what great things God has planned for us.

But for others New Year's morning can be a depressing time. If life has been hard, if life has been weighed down with difficulties, with loss and pain and loneliness and stress and challenge – then the year ahead can stretch out like a dark tunnel, with more of the same, days to be endured rather than enjoyed, fearful of what might happen next.

How often have we said, after some calamity, it's just as well we don't know what lies round the corner! We don't know what lies ahead. Maybe it's a Scottish thing, awaiting doom and gloom, the Rev I M Jolly with his Hogmanay message, at his best...or worst! One year he said “I try not to think of this past year as having been an uphill struggle, hardship, suffering, gloom and despondency. I like to think of it as....sheer misery.”

The Queen gave the year 1992 a name, she called it her Annus Horribilis – Latin for horrible year!

- In March, it was announced that her second son, Prince Andrew, would separate from his wife, the Duchess of York.
- In April, her daughter, Princess Anne, divorced Captain Mark Phillips.
- In June, Diana published her book about three people in her marriage
- In November, Windsor Castle caught fire and was extensively damaged.

Annus Horribilis indeed.

What name would you give 2015? What name will you give 2016?

Jesus came to do a new thing, make all things new.

Isaiah 43: 18 - Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians (1 Cor 5: 17) – Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

Lamentations 3: 23 – God’s blessings are new every morning, great is his faithfulness. New every morning.

A positive new thing is something not done before, something not experienced before, it’s a first, it’s a discovery.

The Bible is full of new things – new grace, new wineskins, new blessings, new life, new heaven and new earth.

What new things are we going to grasp in our individual lives this year?

Paul said that the old has gone, the new has come. But sometimes we hold onto the old. Old makes us think of something that is stale and moth eaten, no longer fit for purpose and needing to be thrown out.

I have a cooker with a main oven and a small oven that I don’t often use. Last week I looked in the small oven and wondered what was in the casserole dish on the bottom shelf. It took Michael and me some time to work out that it was the leftovers of tartaflette that I had made for friends visiting on 28th December! It is made with potatoes and double cream and brie so you can imagine what it looked like about a month later! Old, inedible, to be thrown away.

Every so often we have a clean out and need to get rid of the old things. Similarly there are old memories, old burdens, old baggage from our past that we need to let go. There are things that stop us moving on, pull us back, make us uncertain and unsure about the new future.

We can define ourselves by the negative. For example, we might talk about my arthritis or my angina or my depression or my disability or my grief. We claim the thing as if it defines who and what we are. It’s as if we are covering ourselves with a negative mantle. But it is only a little part of who we are, we are made in the image of God, we are fearfully and wonderfully made, God looks at us and sees the beauty of his creation. Our lives are to reflect the glory of God.

Our birthday cards might tell us that we are 60 or 70 or 80 or more but inside we feel we are still 40 or 30 or 20! We should not be defined by our old bodies but by the spirit within which is renewed day by day!

One of the most inspiring people I have come across recently is Nick Vujicic – he is a 33 year old Serbian/Australian who was born without any arms and legs. As a child he grew up with sadness and frustration, believing that he would never study or get a job or get married and live a normal life.

Nick could have been totally defined by his disability. He could have been bitter and angry and full of self pity and even self loathing. But at 15 he did a new thing and he accepted Jesus into his life and he lives for Jesus. He is an international evangelist who has preached around the world and met presidents and influential people. He has a beautiful wife and a son. He is an inspirational teacher. And so when you see him preach you don't see a man without limbs but you see a man whose face reflects the beauty and glory of God and whose lips proclaim victory and joy.

Two quotes from Nick –

God has given me the grace, strength and comfort through my disability and you can have victory, peace and joy in your life even through your circumstances.

God is using my life as just one example of how God can use a man without arms and legs to be his hands and feet.

Jesus went into the Synagogue in his home town and he did a new thing. He proclaimed the year of the Lord's favour, he turned the world upside down, he calls us as individuals and as a church to make this the year of God's favour.

What will you proclaim this year in 2016? Was last year an annus horribilis? Could this be a year of hope or a year of peace or a year of joy and rejoicing? It will be something different for each one of us.

Perhaps we should name the year. It might be interesting to share in the next week or two over tea and coffee or at home, in our house groups or prayer meeting, what we would like to name this year and we can support one another in seeking to fulfil that desire.

Naming the year does not mean that we will suddenly experience that joy and peace or whatever, we won't feel it all year. But we can look towards it and try to grasp it as often as we can. When the old things creep up, the baggage and the past things, we can say get behind me, I am doing something new now.

I listened to a talk by a lay preacher Angie whose husband died twelve years ago, he committed suicide in his late forties. Just after the funeral God gave Angie a verse of scripture, Psalm 118: 24 **"This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it."** And Angie said, "Lord that scripture can't be for me because I don't know if I'll ever feel joyful and glad again, I'm heartbroken and despairing and lost." But this was her verse and she put it beside her bed and every morning when she awoke she proclaimed these words **"This is the day that the Lord has made, I**

will rejoice and be glad in it.” And for weeks and months she did not feel like rejoicing at all but she kept proclaiming....until one day there was a breakthrough and she realised that she was feeling joy. She still felt pain and grief but there was a new sense of joy in things that were happening in her life.

If we proclaim that thing we hope for, if we name it, then we might achieve it. Not immediately or overnight but in God's time. There are examples in the bible of God giving people new names before a great change in their lives, before the change had actually happened.

Abram became Abraham, named the father of a blessed son, the father of many nations. He was not yet that father but God gave him the name.

Hear what it says about Abraham's reaction in Romans 4: 19-25 reading from The Message –

19-25 Abraham didn't focus on his own impotence and say, "It's hopeless. This hundred-year-old body could never father a child." Nor did he survey Sarah's decades of infertility and give up. He didn't tiptoe around God's promise asking cautiously skeptical questions. He plunged into the promise and came up strong, ready for God, sure that God would make good on what he had said.

What great words, he didn't tiptoe around God's promise asking cautiously skeptical questions. He plunged right in and came up strong, ready for God, sure that God would make good on what he had promised.

Will we take the plunge this year?

I was sitting in my office thinking about this sermon on Friday morning with the storm raging outside, the roof blown off the neighbour's shed, branches cracking as they fell from the trees. And I happened to read the day's message from the Glasgow Prophetic Centre and it seemed relevant to my thoughts. The piece is entitled The Fresh Wind –

A fresh winter wind is blowing in from the sea, one that has been cleansed by the icy north and carries no dust, for it has travelled for a long time, over great oceans. There is moisture in its cold fingers and with it comes the rainstorms that water the land. 'And so', says the Lord, 'I come to you on the wind'. 'I come to you because you have asked for me to touch your land. You have called for my wind and my rain but I shall not come as a shower on a summer's day. I shall come like a cold winter storm because I will not go un-noticed in these days. I will not be ignored or dismissed but I will come like an icy blast and a mighty deluge that cannot be denied. And your dry land that has become so dead and lifeless will be watered. In time your hard ground will become sodden, churned up and flooded so that life can flourish once again.

But first I shall come like the fresh winter wind, so that those who have their backs to me shall feel my touch and turn to face the one who brings life.'

Let us turn to face this new year, to face the one who brings life so that together with the Lord we can be led into pastures new, finding the desires of our hearts, seeking God's will and growing ever.

Amen