

Chrism Mass. St Mary's Cathedral. 30th March 2021

Isaiah 61.1-4; Luke 4.16-21

The learned theology professor was strolling absent-mindedly across the university campus when she was confronted by an eager young Christian. 'Are you saved?' he demanded. The professor was silent for a moment and then she asked, 'Do you mean, have I been saved, am I being saved or shall I be saved?'

This is more than English grammar – the same three dimensions hover behind the words Jesus quotes from Isaiah in our gospel reading. The gospel has been preached, the oppressed set free already in the person of Jesus, we believe – 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' And yet there are still the poor, still blind people, still the downtrodden – this doesn't feel much like the year of the Lord's favour. Which is why we look forward too to when all these things will come to pass and God's mercy and judgement will be a reality for all.

We can't alter the past or control the future, but we can shape our own present and the words of Jesus set out very clearly how we might do so. The gospel isn't merely a matter of words – it isn't a question of saying it loudly or often enough, like the stereotypical Brit abroad – the gospel is preached in word and deed. It is actualized in the way we live and the way we enable others to live. And it can be costly. Look what happened to Jesus!

Our citizenship may be in heaven, as St Paul puts it, but at the moment, like Jesus, we're called to incarnate the love of God in this world. To open ourselves and others to the sanctifying work of God's Spirit so that our already redeemed lives may become holy lives. On one level, this may be a very personal matter, but on another, as I think Jesus' words in Luke 4 make very clear, our Christian witness is unavoidably political too. We can't seriously speak of the justice of God without contending with the powers-that-be.

You may have seen the statement from the College of Bishops about the recent legal judgement that it was unlawful for government to close places of worship during lockdown. There was a curious, almost by-the-way comment from the judge that online worship isn't worship. We would dispute this.

I attended a wonderful act of worship, of community gathering in praise of God, last Sunday. It happened to be on Zoom. As many of you may know, our Synod Clerk, Ruth Innes, has just told us that she is seriously ill. After Sunday's service she shared this with her congregation, who had earlier taken part in the reading of the Passion. Here was a priest speaking truth to her people, and here was the people of God reaching out with love and support in return. Yes, it would have been different, better even, if it could have happened with us physically present to one another, but it was a profound moment, a God-moment nevertheless. It was as if we, collectively, opened a door to our homes and God walked in to embrace us and to weep with us.

No legal judgement can invalidate that, and other moments like that that we've all known over the past 12 months.

On the other hand, it's important for us, and for government to hear that the State has no lawful power to criminalise attendance at worship. This establishes an important precedent. Churches, faiths are not arms of the State and whilst we must render to Caesar what is Caesar's, sometimes our duties to God override what Caesar demands. When it comes to Scottish laws most of the time there's no conflict – and the SEC conformed to what's been asked of us through the pandemic because we believe that law and grace demanded the same thing. In the same way, if at some point a court decided that clergy on their way to worship were free to break the speed limit I hope we would never exercise that freedom.

But the point was well made, I think, that there are other allegiances than State or nation that hold us and direct us. When interests clash, sometimes the State simply has to respect this, to acknowledge that State power is not infinite, that there are some things the State should claim no knowledge of. Equally, if we choose to break the law in the name of God we have to accept the legal consequences of that. Of course, we're fortunate to live in a culture where the clash of values tends to find expression in political debate and change – and mostly we prefer to live with that. Many peoples aren't so fortunate.

So, with foodbanks, for example. If someone's hungry we're required to feed them. Thank God for the various foodbanks across our diocese in which church folk have played their part during the pandemic. But that shouldn't stop us asking why, in our very wealthy country, people are hungry in the first place. It's a scandal; how are we to make God's justice known? Who might be our partners in this?

The same might be said of a whole range of other issues: climate justice, racial justice, trade and gender justice, nuclear weapons – each one calling us to account for **our** behaviour, each one feeding our longing for the day of the Lord's favour, each one asking: what does God require of us?

We're those given the gift and responsibility of ministry. And although this has been a hard year for all of us, yet ministry remains a gift and a privilege. It's what we were anointed to do – and the oils we shall bless in a moment symbolize how our ministry touches the people of God with the life of God's Spirit, teaching, leading, guiding, healing, sending, so that both Holy Week and Easter, death and resurrection help them enter ever deeper into the divine mystery. This remains true, whatever our future holds.

Yes, I know we can get cynical about it but on this occasion, surely, we can acknowledge that we do all this for the God whom we adore. At the same time recognizing that, as Lay Readers recommit themselves to witness to God's love, Deacons to send out God's people in love and service, Priests to lead God's people in mission, Bishops to watch over Christ's own flock, the important thing in all this isn't the 'what' but the 'so-what' – the consequences of our vows, what they lead us to.

Which, to me, is summed up in the imperatives of Luke 4 – that the inextinguishable blaze of the Holy Spirit empowers us, commissions us to fulfil the scripture, to be good news to the poor and to demonstrate that this time, this here and now, this is to be the year of the Lord's favour.