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Epiphany 3C

Sermon notes on Luke 4

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Theme: "What does the mission of the church have to do with wedding feasts?"

First reading: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Gospel: Luke 4:14-21

On this Australia Day weekend it is often an opportunity to review the state of the nation, so maybe it is also a time to review the state of the church. And there is no question that we find ourselves in interesting times to be church in this country.

There is much discussion about the future of the church in this land ... most of it fairly negative. We all know that the church is struggling. Christians' I speak to often speak about being tired, about being worried about who will take their place, about the energy required just to keep the machinery of congregational life functioning.

I have recently been collating and seeking to analyse the attendance figures for the congregations that form the Presbytery of Yarra Yarra. I am not trying to compare 2009 with 1959 when church attendance was probably at its height in this land rather just look at the experience of Uniting Churches in this region over the last few years. With some interesting exceptions the picture is one of steady decline; the picture is not encouraging. And, of course, this picture is repeated across denominations and across the western world.

Even the conservative churches in the United States which have long been keen to tell everyone else how to "do church" have recently been rocked by statistics that show that not only are they not growing in number anymore. They are experiencing decline, too.¹

Of course this is only a portion of the story of the church worldwide ... because there is another

¹ **Martin E. Marty, "Decline in Conservative Churches" in *Sightings* December 14, 2009 http://divinity.uchicago.edu/martycenter/publications/sightings/archive_2009/1214.shtml**

story ... a story about the church in South America, Africa, Russia, Korea and China ... a story of amazing growth often in the face of all sorts of difficulties.

This current state of affairs in the west has resulted in much soul searching, ongoing debates about the church's purpose and identity and even the appearance of a few prophets who claim to know how to solve things and bring the church back to its halcyon days following the Second World War.

Interestingly the truth or otherwise of the words of the Old Testament prophets could only be discerned when their teachings were examined from the vantage place of the future ... so it will be with those who make prognostications about which way the church in our time.

But I think I am pretty safe in saying that it would seem sensible to take a look at the mission that Jesus understood himself to be engaged in as a way of seeking a path for renewal in the church today.

My colleague, Sue Withers was saying the other day that there is so much talk in the church about "change" but actually what we should be talking about and praying about is "renewal."

So let us look at the mission of Jesus.

Following his baptism and temptation in the desert, Luke tells us that Jesus "filled with the power of the Holy Spirit" returned to Galilee and began a ministry that involved teaching in local synagogues.

During this time, Jesus drops in on his home town synagogue on the Sabbath and was asked to read from the scriptures for the day. The reading that Luke tells us that Jesus read was from the prophet Isaiah ... the actual verses being a combination Isa. 61:1-2 and a phrase from Isa. 58:6.

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 favor."

(The phrase "to let the oppressed go free" comes from Isa. 58.)

This is a statement of hope. It is indeed good news.

And as Jesus' one line sermon that followed the reading made clear this statement is not about something for one day in the future or for when he could get around to it, it is "Today...fulfilled in your hearing."

It is a statement of Jesus' mission, but also his identity. We are reminded of this, when later in Luke's gospel two disciples of John the Baptist are sent by John to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them by saying, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers^f are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them." (Luke 7: 18-22) Jesus fulfils the hope laid in Isaiah. He is the one!

Jesus' mission involves bringing good news to people caught up in all sorts of poverty ... release/true-freedom for those held captive by oppressive chains whether those chains are physical, emotional or spiritual ... sight to those who cannot see ... and Jesus is not just talking about physical sight here ... one commentator suggests to understand these words we should envision the experience of a prisoner locked for days in a dark prison cell and who suddenly can see again when the heavy dungeon door is opened and light pours in.²

And pivotally Jesus' mission is to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour ... to proclaim the jubilee when wrongs are righted, when forgiveness flows freely, when equity and justice are restored, when the acceptance and hospitality of God is lived out by the people of God.

So if that was what Jesus was about, is it not clear that that is what we are to be about??

It is not so much that we as church should sit around and think what are we supposed to do ... reinvent ourselves for the 21st century ... create a

² Brendan Byrne, *The hospitality of God: a reading of Luke's gospel*, St Pauls Publications, Strathfield, 2000, p. 48.

new product line ... develop a whole new mission statement for the times ... or perhaps remodel Jesus to suit the times ... rather we are to look at what we see God doing in Jesus, through Scripture and do the same!

Indeed as one modern scholar puts it: it is not so much that the church has a mission, but that the missionary God has a church.³

Our challenge ... our calling ... our mission is with the Spirit's guidance to discern how we can share in the divine mission to bring good news to those who are impoverished, release to those bound in chains, light to those who cannot see, and to declare that this is the time of God's favour ... of God's acceptance and hospitality.

I am not sure that should get too worried about the current decline in numbers in the church, perhaps we cannot do any about it anyway ... but we can be faithful to our calling to share in this mission of good news! As I look at the numbers of those attending worship in the Presbytery I keep reminding myself that when only two or three are gathered Christ is present and there can be a community filled with life and hope ... seeking to live out the mission of God in Jesus!

Even with our limited energy and depleted resources, if we use the gifts with which the Spirit blesses us to share in this mission then we are doing and being the church at mission!

To conclude let me share two examples of sharing in the mission of Christ in "doable" ways:

One example concerns the opportunity that exists with younger people to share good news! Quite a number of people have commented to me (and I have personally experienced) how open younger people can be to talk about the faith ... they have genuine questions about the faith, the church, about Jesus, about this good news that Jesus. One cannot assume they know much about Christian belief or church life, but equally they have no hang-ups about the church ... they are genuinely curious about Christian belief ... they are often keen to hear what we believe ...with such people we need not be defensive ... they just want honest responses. You might be surprised when a young person

³ Craig Van Gelder, *The ministry of the missional church: a community led by the Spirit*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 2007, p.85 (Also quoted in a lecture given by C. Van Gelder, "The Church between the Gospel and our changing context" Vancouver Event, January 23, 2009.)

might cross your path and ask such questions ... especially if they know you attend church.

The second example of sharing good news has to do with the possibility of sharing the favour ... the hospitality ... of God in an intentional way.

I heard recently of one group of Christians who decided that as individuals and families once a month they would invite people who they did not know or knew only in passing into their homes for a meal.⁴ There was no intention to “convert” their guests ... like one of those parties to which a friend invites you and which turns out to be a sales pitch for pyramid selling of a product. No this was just about inviting people into a home to share hospitality.

The hosts speak of how their own lives have been immeasurably enriched by the experience. Yes ... they have offered radical hospitality to others, but in serving others these people have been blessed themselves in so many ways. They have received a sense of the year of the Lord's favour by living out the mission of God ... indeed they report how they have discovered what God has doing in the lives of their guests!

Responding to young people and offering hospitality, two examples of sharing in the mission of Jesus ... the divine mission.

There are signs of significant ill-health in the life of the church ... a salutary reminder that the church in the future is not going to be what it was in days past.

Yet we as church can also see this as challenge not just to change but to renewal ... to renew our commitment to the mission of God in Jesus ... the mission that involves:

Bringing good news to the poor;
Proclaiming release to the captives
Recovery of sight to the blind,
Letting the oppressed go free,
And proclaiming the year of the
Lord's favour.

⁴ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: equipping your church to reach a changing world*, Joessey-Bass, San Francisco, 2006, p. 155ff.