

“The Word in slow motion” a sermon preached in Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 24 January 2016, Epiphany 3C, based on Nehemiah 8:1-10 and Luke 4:14-21.

There are times when things are straight forward and we commit quickly and act and it is done and we move on.

There are other times when so much is involved, we commit slowly, after considerable reflection.

For Jesus, this was such a time.

So Luke describes the moment in slow motion.

1. He went to the synagogue.
2. He stood up to read.
3. The scroll was given to him.
4. He unrolled the scroll.
5. He found the place.
6. He read the passage.
7. He rolled up the scroll.
8. He gave it back to the attendant.
9. He sat down.
10. And he began to speak.

Deliberate. Measured. Slow.

Why so deliberate?

Because Jesus was choosing his agenda, his manifesto.

He did not invent it or write it. He received it, from Isaiah, the prophet. And in choosing this text from Isaiah, Jesus stepped into a long-running river, a river called Jubilee, the Jubilee River.

Jubilee was a radical encompassing vision.

In the fiftieth year of the nation, Jubilee year, liberty was proclaimed for people enslaved by debt. Families forced to sell their land because of debt, had it restored to them.

This is how it worked.

If a person became poor and needed to sell their land, it was the duty of the nearest kinsman to buy it. The original owner retained the right to regain the land. In the fiftieth year, the year of Jubilee, if it had not already been regained, the land was restored to its original owner.

In the event of a total economic collapse when all land went, the owner and his whole family would sell themselves, not as slaves but as resident employees. But they were only resident employees until the year of Jubilee, the fiftieth year, and not for more than one generation.

And if the person had to sell themselves outside the clan, then the whole clan had to redeem the debt.

Jubilee was to ensure land did not end up in a few hands. It preserved equality and the viability of each family.

It seems over time this practice fell into disuse, but the principle remained. Jubilee aimed to prevent excessive private accumulation of land and wealth, to restore land to people who lost it because of poverty, and to make it possible for them to provide for themselves, to start again.

I have talked about how Luke slowed down time as Jesus selected the text. Well, Jubilee stopped time and started it again.

It took from money the quality of eternity that belonged only to God. It put a cap on how long capital would earn interest.

One writer says this ...

“We enjoy time, we are carried along in the flow of time, everything is embedded in its time, so the very idea of exploiting the flow of time to take interest on money lent seemed preposterous. Capitalist market economies have been elevated to global importance; they are enshrined with the qualities of omnipotence that border on idolatry.”

Jubilee limits money feeding on money. It limits people accumulating vast quantities of money, reinvested generation after generation.

The text Jesus chose that day was a Jubilee text.

“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.”

Because Jesus took that text, so did the early Church.

The Book of Acts says the early followers had everything in common. Everyone had enough. There was a strong sense of equality.

When we come to faith, we step into that river.

We live that faith in a world where 3.5 billion people have virtually no wealth, the equivalent of the world's population in the 1970s.

The poorest 10% in our world are in debt, whereas the 35 million millionaires in our world hold 44% of global wealth.

People with more than \$NZ1.1M are the world's richest 1% and they hold 48 per cent of the globe's wealth.

Since 2010 the wealth of the bottom half has dropped 41% and the most wealthy 62 have seen a 44% increase.

It's in that context we step into the Jubilee river.

Given how far-reaching that vision was, given how much was involved, given the immensity of the challenge even in his day, what brought Jesus to that point?

Well, over the last weeks, it has all seemed quite ordinary.

He got lost in the temple among the people of God where he seemed at home.

He listened to scripture read and explained, week by week.

He was mentored by his mother Mary who did not let him get away with anything.

He joined the queue of people being baptised by John.

And just before this moment, out in the starkness of the desert, he turned down what the devil had to offer, attractive as it was. He looked instead to what God had to offer.

So today, in the synagogue, he reads the Jubilee text and becomes a Jubilee man.

In the book of Nehemiah we hear another story of people finding a text. It wasn't long after the exiles had returned to the Holy City, Jerusalem. Exiled in Babylon, they had accommodated themselves to Babylonian ways.

They lived in Babylon for fifty years. Finally free, they stood in Jerusalem's gate. The walls of the city lay in ruin and there was a real mess. So they rolled up their sleeves and got to work.

They repaired the watchtowers, rebuilt the gardens, reopened the markets, restored the gates. They were eager and hard-working and eventually the walls were repaired, the neighbourhoods were safe, the vines were planted, the city seemed at peace.

Yet, something was missing. Something was incomplete.

Then the people remembered what it was that they had forgotten. They could not remember their story, their story intertwined with God's story. They couldn't remember how that story went.

There they were back in Jerusalem, had fixed things up, had got things in order, things were functioning well. Yet they could not remember who they were, or why they were building, or the meaning of what had happened to them while they were in exile.

So Ezra reads the text, the story, to men and women and children and all who would gather.

For about six hours he reads. And the story is interpreted, so people understand what is read.

And when the people hear the words, they weep.

We are Jubilee people in a country that has forgotten the text.

The overwhelming majority of New Zealanders do not know the text which gives us a vision of equality.

So as a nation we go with the latest shifting wind, with the latest plausible economic vision.

In the midst of this, how do we keep in the river? How do we keep captured by the vision?

Last week, I met with someone who has been researching how people come to faith, and what those people who come to faith look for from people of faith.

One of the key things people look for from us is disciplines of the spirit.

People coming to faith want to know how to pray, how to read the Bible, how to listen to God, how to do what God requires.

And they want to learn it from people who are facing the same kind of challenges as they do, yet trying to live the Jesus life.

Using Luke's words, they want to know how to be filled with the power of the Spirit.

They sense what is needed in order to be Jubilee people.

So where are we in this?

This Word, this Bible, takes time, slow time, deliberate time, attention time.

Time for the Word to capture us, win us, live in us and for us to live in it.

To be filled with the power of the Spirit.

To be Jubilee people of a Jubilee Jesus.