

“Word, Spirit, Action, Today” a sermon based on Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 and Luke 4:14-21 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 27 January 2019.

There’s a word we use often.

When I use it, it seems to have little impact.

But when Jesus used that word the people were enraged and it was enough for him to be thrown out of the town.

Luke sets the scene.

A hometown boy returning home.

He had come to the synagogue as usual.

His fame had spread so people had turned out to hear him.

They knew him.

Little Jeshua bar Joseph grown up.

The friendly. The familiar.

Worship is under way.

Jesus stands up to read.

As he ascends the steps, the attendant draws aside the silk curtain containing the sacred manuscripts and hands him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

Whether the Isaiah scroll was handed to Jesus by prearrangement or by providence we do not know.

The synagogue had no official readers; any competent male member could read one of the lessons.

With the scroll in his hand, Jesus purposely and meticulously finds this passage: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me for 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.”

When Jesus is done reading, he follows established custom and sits down to preach.

The eyes of the hometown crowd are fixed on him, and he says that word.

The word is today – Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

It’s a word that can be empty of power.

When you suggest to your child “You need to tidy your room today,” you know it will have little impact.

Or to a tradesperson, “Are you coming to do the work today?”, when you really already know the answer.

On the lips of Jesus the word today has power because with him there is no light between intention and action.

Today, he says, the hopes contained in Isaiah's vision are realised in your hearing.

Today you will be restored and redeemed.

Today you will know the promise of God's final deliverance.

Now today didn't just turn up. It took a time to arrive.

Jesus stretched back into the history of his faith to find it.

The words he spoke were originally addressed to exiles who had returned from Babylon to their homeland after 539 BCE.

When they returned and saw the state of their country, they were devastated. Their expectations of a new life dissolved.

So Isaiah restated a vision for them, reviving their spirits.

Jesus remembered that vision and was able to draw back the curtain on the library of sacred manuscripts for today.

Today, that library we call the Bible is still available, if we would but draw back the curtain.

Profound poetry. Gut-wrenching pain. Intense anger. Deep despair. Shocking betrayal. Brave hope. Noble compassion. And more

The story of the people of God

Stories of how God engages people.

We don't need to arrive at today as self-starters, un-resourced.

And Just as we reach back, so does the future coming rushing towards us to make today.

The resources of the past and the urgency of the future meet in today.

The preacher Tom Long says of the coming kingdom of God – "God's good future is hurtling towards us, bringing the finished work of God to an unfinished world."

That future filled Jesus.

We heard from the gospel of Luke ...

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit

And when he began reading the passage from Isaiah ... The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.

The Spirit brings God's tomorrow today.

She is the one who hits us between the eyes with the immediacy of God's word and with the urgency of God's future.

Let me give a personal example.

For years I had tried to read the Bible. It made little sense. I went to study groups. People gave me studies to guide my understanding. But it was like looking through a glass very darkly. Mystifying. Nothing seemed to help. I gave up.

Then as an adult I was drawn into the Christian faith. I became part of the church. The night I knelt beside my bed and prayed to be a follower of Jesus, was the night the Bible started to make sense. Scales fell from my eyes. I had an appetite for the Bible. Over the next week I read it as much as I could. Like a novel I couldn't put down.

I was no longer reading something far away and long ago. It was today. I felt the Bible was reading me. I kept saying to myself ... this is me.

When I read this – “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” Romans 7:15

Today arrived. Now. Here. Me.

The difference was Holy Spirit. I did not need more knowledge. I needed more Spirit. I needed my spirit to be touched by the Spirit behind these words.

The Holy Spirit makes the Word immediate and the future urgent.

Martin Luther King Jr. knew the dangers inherent in doing things today.

King penned his *Letter from Birmingham Jail* after southern white moderates criticised his nonviolent protests as “unwise and untimely.”

“Change,” King was told, “must come slowly.” They urged him to stop the sit-ins and marches for a while and give things time to settle down.

They saw negotiation with the white power structure as the more reasonable path and advised King to be more patient in his pursuit of civil rights.

King, determined to live in *nowness*, explains to his sympathetic critics that he has never engaged in a direct-action movement that was “well-timed.”

He notes that the word *wait* rings in the ear of the disenfranchised with piercing familiarity.

Refusing to abide by a more cautious approach, King says that waiting is too much of a burden for oppressed people to continue to bear.

Justice too long delayed is justice denied.

King knew from experience that *wait* almost always meant *never*.

Act today.

Face the immediacy of God's word.

Sense the urgency of God's future.

Nehemiah felt that.

He was determined to rebuild Jerusalem.

Surrounded by naysayers, critics, powerful opponents, cynical leaders.

But he persisted and when the work was done he called a grand assembly.

Normally the people marked a holy day with reading and interpreting the law of Moses.

And during this ritual reading there was mourning and weeping.

Instead, the people are told to make the day holy through their eating and drinking and rejoicing.

This fractured community had deep and persisting problems.

But instead of being overwhelmed, the people are told to build community by throwing a party.

That is the spirit of the words of Jesus.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me for 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.”

Hear the words – the Spirit has anointed me. Bring good news. Proclaim release. Proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.

This is economic justice through joyful revolution, from the power of the Holy Spirit arising within.

Today.

The immediacy of God’s word.

The urgency of God’s future.

The Spirit of God arising within.

The people of God acting today.

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