

(Up)setting the Agenda

A sermon on Luke 4:14-21 & 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 by Nathan Nettleton, 24 January 2016

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Message

Jesus's agenda, which we are called to follow, is about healing, liberating and gathering in the excluded, not purifying the community by excluding anyone.

Sermon

Have you ever noticed how whenever there is a significant revival of religious fervour, it seems to produce crusades against those who are seen as insufficiently religious? The ones who are fired up with new religious enthusiasm become very hostile towards those who don't share their beliefs or their rigour. Sinners are named and shamed and called to repentance, and if they fail to repent, they are shunned and run out of town. Sometimes this turns to outright violence. Alleged witches have been lynched, heretics have been burned at the stake, and pagans have been forced to convert or be slaughtered. However misguided Islamic State's understanding of Islam may be, they are a revival movement, and their zealotry and brutality have been matched many times by equally misguided Christian revivals. Their apocalyptic view of a violent purifying war between the forces of heaven and hell is not at all unique, and their call for everyone to take sides and rid the world of sinners and infidels has plenty of precedents, Christian as well as Muslim.

Most of us here have been part of churches at some stage of our journeys that saw the mission of Jesus as being first and foremost, and perhaps entirely, focussed on saving people's souls from ending up in hell. We were told that to avoid hell, we had to believe rightly and behave rightly, purifying ourselves and rising up against evil and religious impurity. And this teaching was often reinforced by highlighting the alleged evils of those categories of people who were clearly destined for hell. Recognising their corruptness and keeping ourselves from being polluted by their poisonous company was a big part of how we defined ourselves and knew ourselves to be the good, the chosen, the saved, the blessed. We knew who we were and we knew who they were and the dividing lines were very very clear.

The main problem with thinking that Jesus's main agenda was separating the good from the evil to save us from hell is that it takes almost no account of how Jesus himself described his main agenda. In tonight's gospel reading, we heard Jesus setting out his mission statement in his first recorded public preaching in his home town of Nazareth. He quotes from the prophet Isaiah:

“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 favour.”

And then he opens his sermon by stating, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Or in other words, “This is what we're on about, and now we are underway. You are all invited to get on board.”

We will hear the rest of what he had to say next Sunday, and we will hear that the result was that the people we so outraged that they ran him out of town and very nearly killed him on the spot. At first glance you'd be excused for wondering why. He doesn't explicitly criticise or condemn anyone. If he had been preaching hellfire and damnation and telling the people that they were sinners destined to burn, then you might understand their anger. But he doesn't say any such thing. There is no mention of hell at all or of anyone being cut off or condemned. The needy are going to hear good news, the oppressed and imprisoned are going to be set free, the blind are going to have their eyes opened, and the Lord's chosen time will be announced. That's not exactly the typical religious revival, but why would it provoke such a hostile response? What sacred cows are being threatened by this agenda?

Quite a few actually. Sometimes the crucial thing is what is not said. You know how this works, because we laugh about it with our politicians all the time. "Minister, can you promise us that poverty will be halved by this time next year?" "Well, can I just say that our government is absolutely committed to doing the right thing by all Australians and that our policies are the right policies for these difficult times, blah, blah, blah." That would be a 'no' then, wouldn't it? So perhaps the crucial thing about Jesus's mission statement is not just what he says, but what he was expected to say but declines to say. If you are a young preacher preaching revival, what you are expected to say is that God is angry about the evil in the world, and is coming to set things right and punish the evil doers. Then those who think of themselves as the victims, the sinned against, which is usually all of us – have you noticed how even in a prosperous country like ours, almost everyone still thinks they are among the battlers? – we all hear that as a vindication because God's anger is directed against our enemies, so we must be okay, we must be the good ones. If we are not struggling with external enemies at the time, then we will find internal ones, and our young revivalists will be expected to rail against the alleged evils of sabbath breaking or alcohol or homosexuality or Islam or whatever it is this year. This is safe ground for young revivalistic preachers. Breathe fire against whoever the people fear. God is coming to destroy them. Will you good people rise up and offer yourselves as the sword in God's hand? It's money for jam.

But Jesus is not looking for the easy path to popularity. He has just returned from the wilderness where the devil tempted him with the path of easy popularity. You can hear the echoes of that in this story still. We are told that "the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him." There's his opportunity. Say something popular and do something miraculous like they'd heard he had done elsewhere. The devil's temptations are continuing, but Jesus doesn't take the bait. In fact, he goes so far as to edit out the very bits the people are itching to hear. When Isaiah said "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour," the very next words were "and the day of vengeance of our God." There's your favourite revivalist, rise-up-against-God's-enemies, theme right there. That's what the people wanted to hear. But Jesus pointedly cuts it short, rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the attendant, and sits down. And as we will hear next Sunday, with all eyes on him and the opportunity to explain himself, he leaves us in no doubt that his editing was deliberate. The ones you hoped God was coming to destroy are actually among the beloved of God, and this message of good news and freedom and recovery of sight is just as much for despised foreigners as for you. If you want to know how well that sells, try turning up at an Australia Day rally on Tuesday with a big sign saying that God intends to show love and mercy to jihadi terrorists just as much as to flag-waving Australians, and see how long you last. Or turn up at a Christian family values rally with a sign saying that God has sent you to proclaim good news of welcome to the homosexuals and mercy to the abortionists.

In stark contrast to the normal religious revival agenda of identifying and excluding the alleged targets of God's wrath, Jesus deliberately and systematically edits out references to vengeance and punishment, and proclaims an agenda of gathering in the outcasts, the excluded, the despised, and the downtrodden. The very ones seen as dangerous pollutants who will corrupt pure religion. He proclaims an emerging culture of radical love and mercy with no boundaries and no limits. Everyone, without exception, is invited to get on board. No one has to measure up before they are welcome. Instead of "measure up and you will be saved", the message is that "you are saved, you are loved and forgiven, and therefore you are now set free to grow into the fullness of life and love that you were created for." Now you are released to reflect the love and mercy you have been shown.

The Apostle Paul expressed the same radical and unexpected message in the extract we heard tonight from his Corinthian correspondence. He too was messing with the imagery to subvert what the people were expecting to hear. The image of the community as a single body made up of many members with different functions came straight out of the mainstream political rhetoric of his day. Roman emperors, senators and governors were very fond of this image because it told the ordinary people that they should be happy with their humble position, respect the position of their betters, and play their part in building the society. It was essentially a pragmatic argument. Everyone has a role to play and society will benefit from everyone pulling their weight. It is not uncommon to hear Paul's words being preached with the same message, but in fact, Paul subverts that message. When he advocates a radical inclusion and honouring of everyone, he doesn't argue it from the perceived benefits. Instead he argues that we must do this because it is what Christ is like. Jesus is all inclusive, and so therefore we, as his church, must be all inclusive. We have all been baptised into Christ, and so there is no basis on which we can now start excluding anyone. It is not that there are no differences, there clearly are. Jew or Greek, slave or free, black or white, conservative or liberal, gay or straight, yuppie or bogan, left or right, hand, foot or ear – we are all different, and yet we are all one in Christ, baptised into his one body, eating his one bread and drinking of his one Spirit.

When we, in this church, continually seek to find ways to more clearly express an inclusiveness that gathers in those who might otherwise be excluded on grounds of age, race, language, religion, capability, sexual identity, or immigration status, it is not because we are trying to express some bland, liberal, politically correct, anything-goes tolerance. It is because we have an evangelical commitment to being faithful to the agenda that Jesus proclaimed as his agenda and the agenda of his people, and to the agenda that Paul and the apostles carried on fearlessly in the face of nationalistic and religious persecution. We are not just bleeding hearts trying to be nice. We are followers of Jesus trying to work out how to live up to his example. This is the gospel. God's love and mercy and welcome are for everyone, no favourites, no exceptions, no entrance tests. It's not popular. You can get yourself killed for it. Jesus did. But it is the gospel, pure and simple. It is hard work. Hanging out with your own kind is so much easier and more instantly gratifying. Learning to communicate and love across cultural boundaries is challenging. Being reconciled to those one thought of as undesirables or enemies is terrifying and complicated. But it is the gospel. It is what Jesus died for. It is what we have been baptised into. And ultimately it is who Jesus is, and, because Jesus is God's ultimate self-revelation, it is the ultimate truth of who God is. So, as those baptised into his body, his agenda, his mission, it is who we are called and destined to be.