

“FIRST THINGS FIRST”

LUKE 4:14-30

The Abolition of Bridge Tolls Bill – to scrap charges on the Forth and Tay bridges

The Judiciary Bill - to modernise the organisation and leadership of Scotland's judiciary

The Local Healthcare Bill –patients and the public will be encouraged to have a greater involvement in the delivery of local healthcare services

The Graduate Endowment (Abolition) Bill A total of 50,000 current students, including those graduating this year, will not have to pay the £2,000 graduate endowment fee

The Culture Bill The Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen will be merged to form a new cultural development body, Creative Scotland.

These are some of the 11 bills of new Scottish Government; this is their programme for next year. They set out their programme this week at Holyrood, telling us what they plan to do, taking some of their promises in election manifesto and they now begin the process of putting these into practice. “These are our priorities!” is what this is all about. They have come in for criticism: “this is less a Queen’s speech and more the musings of a man who would be King” (Annabel Goldie). This is “all gong and no dinner”.(Nicol Stephen) The opposition parties think it light, lacking in substance, but nonetheless, these are the Scottish Government’s stated priorities.

Churches set priorities as well. 6 years ago we identified 5 Core Tasks in Juniper Green, things that we see as important for Church life, without which we would be failing: these core tasks are Worship, Mission, Prayer, Nurture, Service; within these 5 Core Tasks, the Kirk Session has just been discussing a new set of goals and aims for the next 5 years and picking out some aspects of Church life that we have identified as significant priorities for the next stage in Church life. We will let you have these in the next few weeks. The Church can’t do everything; there are all sorts of ways of being Church, all kinds of needs in the community; we can’t do everything, so we need to pick out what we see as important; ‘these are our priorities!’

We do that as individuals as well. On a Saturday morning, how do you spend your time? If you are a parent with a young family, how many different activities could your children be involved in? If you look around the city, the choices are almost endless. How do you decide? You choose one that is higher on your list of priorities. You choose on basis of which you think is more important.

All this is to introduce Jesus first recorded sermon in Luke 4. Last week we looked at the start of Jesus’ ministry, with the story of John the Baptist and his ministry pointing people to Jesus, preparing the way for Jesus’ coming. You can read the sermon again at www.jgpc.org.uk/sermons or read the printed version in the vestibule; there is also a handout giving some background to Luke and an outline. Jesus had gone to Nazareth, the home town boy comes home. He had gone to the synagogue on Saturday (like

going to Church on Sunday) and He was invited to preach the sermon! Either the reading for the day was Isaiah 61, or that was reading He chose: "*The Spirit...*" (Luke 4:18f) After reading the Bible passage, He sat down and said "*Today...*" (4:20) He must have gone on to say more than that because Luke tells us that "*All spoke...*" (4:22) Isaiah 61 is clearly a passage about the Messiah, so by reading this and saying what He did, Jesus is clearly saying to the home-town crowd 'I am God's Messiah come to do God's work.' The people were astonished; we have a phrase in Scotland that sums it up "We kent his faither!" This is a way of putting someone in their place when we think they've grown too big for their boots. "He's only the son of the village carpenter!" This is not to belittle joiners, but it was their way of trying to bring Jesus back down to earth. This astonishment would turn hostile later!

In this first sermon Jesus outlines His priorities: "*To preach...*" (4:18f) Jesus came to bring good news to the world's troubled people! In a sense, "*to preach...*" is then explained by all others; they tell us what that first sentence means. There are people who are prisoners, blind, oppressed and Jesus has come to meet their needs. The most obvious way to understand this is physically and literally, but in fact we need to understand this spiritually as well. There are people who are in prison to their fears, who are oppressed by their guilt and failure, who are blind to the reality of God and faith and Jesus came to meet their deepest needs. One of the best-known parts of Jesus' early ministry was His healing of people in need and He did that over and over again as we shall see, but we can see evidence in what Jesus says that He did not see this healing work as His main priority; "*At daybreak...*" (4:42) Other things were more important in Jesus' mind and rather than be distracted, He set off somewhere else to do work He really came to do.

Jesus' priority was people, bringing the grace of God to people in need no matter who they were. He saw people in need, poor, blind, oppressed, captive and His great desire was to help them, to meet their needs, and ultimately to be their Saviour. That was why He came. The poor find wealth of self-esteem, worth and value, forgiveness and significance. The prisoners are set free by the good news of forgiveness, peace and hope in place of guilt, fear and despair. The blind see how important God is, how God has loved the world and see the importance of faith. But this got Him into trouble because the Jews thought He was rescuing the wrong people! It had started off well enough; they were impressed by His sermon to begin with, but then began to explain who this grace is for. He picked out 2 Old Testament examples: "*there were...*" (4:25ff) What was significant about these 2 examples is that neither of these people was Jewish; they were both foreigners and yet Israel's God was gracious to both of them. By these 2 examples, Jesus is saying that grace is for everyone, for beyond Israel to whole world. His priority was to meet needs of people no matter who they were or where they came from! God was rescuing the wrong people. They had the theory as expressed in Psalm 67: read it again and see how often it talks about 'all nations' & 'all peoples', but now they didn't like the idea of grace going beyond Israel's boundaries. They tried to throw Him off a cliff for these views, but He walked away! Messiah who would serve those in need from all world and be Saviour for all world.

Jesus' sense of priorities had already been tested before He even preached His sermon. In the episode before this, He had spent 40 days in the desert as part of His preparation for ministry; it was time to pray, to study; it was time alone with God to clear His mind about job to come. These 40 days then became time of testing, with His encounter with devil. It was all about conflicting ideas and thoughts and priorities: 'These stones to become bread; all the kingdoms of the world can be yours; throw yourself down and God will rescue you.' This was all about fame and power: turning stones into bread would make Jesus a famous magician; He could be the ruler of the world if only He would sell his soul to devil; He could show off the power of God by a silly stunt. Jesus rejects all of these power games; He knows that to do any of these things is to divert His attention from what really matters. Loyalty to God is more important than magic games; serving God is better than being all-powerful lord; trusting God is better than short-term fame and celebrity. He had rejected fame, power, and celebrity already in order to focus on serving needy people and being their Saviour.

What kind of Messiah would Jesus be? There are 2 key priorities that underlie these 2 episodes in Luke. 1)He would be a Messiah who would serve God; Jesus' key concern was to be the kind of Messiah that God wanted, His priority was to obey God and do God's will all of the time. So He rejected the testings of the devil; so He stood up to Jews in Nazareth; it mattered more to Him that He served God and did God's will. 2)He would be a Messiah who would serve needy people, no matter who they were or where they came from; so He rejected power games, celebrity status or silly stunts; so He made Himself unpopular with local Jews as he talked about God's grace for all people in need no matter who they might be. All that mattered to Jesus was serving God and serving other people.

Last Saturday, the Kirk Session took itself down to Heriot-Watt Chaplaincy for the day to hold a little conference so that we could discuss and decide some of our priorities for the next 5 years. At the beginning, some of elders took time to express something of their hopes and aspirations for the future of our Church here in Juniper Green. All of them, in different ways talked about their hopes for us as people: for the Church to be sensitive to each others needs and sensitive to how each of us wants our faith to grow and how we want to worship, even when that is different from others; a Church that is being honest, generous, loving, forgiving, compassionate, caring, committed; about a Church rejoicing in people we have and building on existing people by adding new people; about being a network of people connected together by common faith and common desire to worship and serve God and serve others. So we should be a Church concerned to "*Preach good...*" (4:18)

It is so easy for Churches to forget these priorities. We can get caught up in power games, competing with 'rival churches' and so being bigger, stronger than all the rest is what matters. Or we become caught up in structures, the things that we need to do to satisfy the structures of the Church as denomination; some of that needs to be done and we need sound ways of working, but these are not the be-all-&-end-all of the Church. Or we focus on

the differences and what we disagree about and fall out over what we disagree about; so many churches are like that, but what disagree over can be the most trivial thing in Church life! Or we can be the church that is put out when new people come in because disturbing status quo; 'not people we know!' I'm not making any of this up!

Individually, what are our priorities? This is not the question we ask everyday, but is a taking-stock kind of question. We don't often put that into words; these may change as time and our circumstances change. We can't do everything. The challenge for us to set priorities and not rush around trying to do everything that we're asked to do. As Christians we ought to have 2 main priorities: to love God and to love our neighbour no matter who that may be. Other things, important as they may be, should fit round these 2 qualities. We can't be or do everything; what really matters?

Priorities – what are ours? As a Church, as individuals? For Jesus, His priorities were to serve God and serve other people. His priority was to be the kind of Messiah God wanted Him to be – to bring grace to needy people no matter who they were. Never mind the celebrity status; never mind the power games; never mind the silly stunts; His real aim was to help and save needy people like you and me. This is good news for you and me; for people like us Jesus came to help and save; the challenge for the Church is to continue what Jesus started, "*Preach good...*" (4:18) no matter who they may be.