

LUKE 4:14-21
 JESUS' PEOPLE – WHO?

Who is Jesus for? Who is the gospel for? *Lost for Words* has been our 6-week course in helping to talk about our faith with people we know and meet. Early on in the course, we were thinking about the things that make these conversations difficult and one of these barriers is the sense that Jesus, the gospel and the Church are only for people who have life 'sorted' and that somehow people whose lives are messy don't belong in Church. This is a huge frustration in the context of that course because we know, don't we, that Jesus, the gospel, and the church are for everyone. We were singing a few moments ago about the "people of the risen King", the people who belong to Jesus; I am taken with the way in which the hymn makes it plain who belongs: "*Come, those whose joy is morning sun, And those weeping through the night; Come, those who tell of battles won, And those struggling in the fight... Come, young and old from every land - Men and women of the faith; Come, those with full or empty hands - Find the riches of His grace*". There is space for all kinds of people, those for whom life is straightforward and the battles are won, as well as those who lie awake at night in despair, space for those whose hands are full of good things, who are richly blessed, as well as for those whose hands are empty!

What is it that, when someone is struggling with the hard things of life, when everything about life is falling apart, could have them say about church "I didn't feel I could belong then!" At precisely the time when they most needed the support and love of Christian brothers and sisters, this was the time when they felt that unable to belong because life was a mess. Now I know that there are all sorts of reasons for that kind of feeling, but is there something in us that makes people think that way? Is there something that we say, or even give off, that makes people whose lives are a mess consider that they don't belong here? If that is the case, then we need to come in spirit of repentance before God; that is not Jesus' way, that is not the way of grace and the gospel. Yet, to be honest it has been the way of the church for such a long time. There is a whole raft of Scottish society that sees the Church as a middle-class organisation, and to be part of it you need to sign up to a dress-code and a code of conduct before you even walk through the door. The Church in Scotland has never managed to break that image; there are times when we've not even tried.

What is Jesus like? That's where we need to take our lead! We need to think in the way Jesus thought! Let's go to the synagogue in Nazareth; it is Saturday morning and the people are gathering for worship. Jesus is at home and, as He usually did, He went to the synagogue. He is developing a bit of a reputation as a preacher, so He is invited to read the Bible and preach the sermon. We have no way of knowing whether the piece He read was the appointed passage for that day or whether He chose it for Himself, but He read the opening verses of Isaiah 61: "*The Spirit...*" (Luke 4:18) His first comment in the sermon: "*Today...*" (Luke 4:21) Then He went on to explain what the passage meant and how this was Messiah's ministry and the ministry that God had sent Him to do. To begin with, the people are happy with His sermon, happy even if a bit taken aback; "we kent His faither" after all, He is the local boy and we'd not expect such wisdom from the carpenter's boy. But then things begin to go awry, to turn nasty, and the crowd is not so much appealed by what He says as appalled by what He says. What made the difference? He asked the question: "Who is the gospel for? Who is the grace of God for? Who is the kingdom and the blessing of God for?" Nazareth doesn't like the answer!

Jesus quotes Isaiah 61. People knew that this passage spoke about the Messiah's coming and Jesus clearly identifies Himself with that hope. "*The Spirit...*" (Luke 4:18f) It would be possible to pick out individual groups of people in these verses and give

them individual characteristics, but let's simply take the broad impression that Jesus gives. God has called Him to do ministry with - whom? The "poor, prisoners, blind, and oppressed". These are the people for whom Jesus has come. Now, at the very least we can say that these are people for whom life has not been easy and to whom life has not been kind. The "world's troubled people" is way in which Leon Morris sums up this list. These are people for whom life is troubled in all kinds of ways: even if we take them at face value, the poor are people who have nothing and have no-one to speak up for them, the down-trodden and the disadvantaged; prisoners have lost their liberty and that may be because of some crime, but there are all kinds of captivity that are nothing to do with criminal activity; the blind are those who can't see and these eyes can be physical, but they can also be emotional, social, or spiritual; the oppressed are victims who are overwhelmed by powerful and strong people, bullied into submission.

The woman who told me recently that for the first time in her life she felt free; the teenage boy whose father is in prison and who is in care because his mother can't look after him; the girl whose 'friends', the people who come round her house, bully her and call her all kinds of names and who finds the 'out-of-classroom' culture at school hard to take because she is black; the church leader full of anger because of feeling unloved and unappreciated by the people he or she is called to lead - these are just a few of the conversations that I've had since the start of 2014! Is Jesus for these people? We'd say "Of course He is!" and we'd be right! We see lots of people who, on the outside, look fine and if you ask them they will tell you that they are fine! But behind closed doors, they are anything but fine. Is gospel for people whose lives are messed up? Broken? Oppressed? Of course it is! We'd sign up for that!

But for Jesus this became controversial. The geography of grace was controversial: in His sermon, He went on to tell stories of the grace of God in the gospel in previous generations, in days of Elijah and Elisha the prophets. There are two examples of God at work, meeting the needs of the poor, blessing people in exactly the way Isaiah 61 predicts. Except, these two examples were from beyond the boundaries of Israel, they were from abroad, and the people blessed were not Jews. So bound up were they with their understanding of God, that His blessing was only for Israel, that they no longer found Jesus appealing, they no longer spoke well of Him; now they wanted to throw Him off the local cliff. It was clear that for the people of Nazareth that there were some people and the gospel was not for these; grace was not for them; Jesus was not to be for these people.

The gospel was socially controversial: we read the story of the man with leprosy. Do you remember years ago when AIDS was seen as an epidemic and Princess Diana went to the hospice and deliberately held the hand of someone suffering with AIDS? She was making a deliberate point, but it was controversial at the time! Leprosy was the same in Jesus' time: you were not allowed to touch someone with leprosy; they were excluded, forced to live outside the village, away from society and they had to warn people that they were coming, lest you touch them and become contaminated. Jesus met the man with leprosy: "*Lord...*" (*Luke 5:12f*) Jesus touched the man and healed him; the one who was a social outcast was healed, his life transformed. These are stories that could be repeated over and over again in the ministry of Jesus; the people who applauded sermon at the start, now found the reality hard to take.

Where do our boundaries lie? What about our geographical boundaries? The gospel is for our community, but not the place next door? It is for Scotland, but we're not sure about England? Or we're all right with grace for the UK, but we're not sure about Cambodia because that's abroad! What about social boundaries? The gospel is for

people like us, that's fine, but... they need to learn to be like us before we accept them and offer them grace? There are all kinds of challenges to our boundaries in our society: people who are in Scotland, trafficked for the sex industry during the Commonwealth Games – is the gospel for them? Families who are rushing around trying to accumulate as much as they can, in terms of money, possessions, good things for their children, but their sole focus is money, and they are ignoring faith – is the gospel for them? People who laugh at Christians and who dismiss Christian faith as irrelevant and the church as intolerant – is the gospel for them? People who bully and oppress, who beat others and make them feel small – is the gospel for them? People who don't know when to stand up and when to sit down in a church service – is the gospel for them? People who this week have been transported in the back of tipper trucks from Thailand and literally dumped on the Cambodian border – is the gospel for them? Is the gospel for those who are oppressing them? Michael Wilcock summed it up: the gospel is "good news for me whoever *I* may be (and) is equally good news for me to pass on to my neighbour whoever *he* may be." How does that sit? Where now are our boundaries?

Jesus, the gospel, grace, transforms lives. The man with leprosy was healed and his life was changed forever. *"Some wandered...Some sat...Some became...Others went..."* (Psalm 107:4,10,17,23) Psalm 107 tells four (or more) stories of people whose lives were troubled and messy; some through no fault of their own; others because of the mistakes they had made. *"Let them..."* (Psalm 107:8), a refrain that is repeated every time; the unfailing love of the Lord has transformed their lives; they have a new story to tell, a story of grace and love from God to change things. Those who were hungry are satisfied; those in despair are set free; those who go to the sea in ships are given a safe harbour. These are wonderful little pen-pictures of the kind of lives that people live and their testimony to the love that God has for people, the love that is unfailing and that is for us in every situation of our lives. Jesus, grace, and the gospel transforms our lives so that people who wandered lost in the wilderness find a new direction, hope, and purpose in life; those who are trapped by their past failures, mistakes and guilt are forgiven and set free; those who are oppressed and bullied and made to feel rubbish, are given a new sense of themselves, their worth and their value as people loved by Jesus; those poor and downtrodden and disadvantaged are shown that someone does care for them and does listen to their cries for help. This is gospel transformation!

"Come people of risen King" – who are these people? "We are the people of the risen king!" Can say that in at least two ways: we can say "We are the people!" with a huge sense of arrogance; "We belong, look at us; we belong and you don't and you never will until you become like us!" Is that the way we think? If so, a huge amount of repentance is needed for that arrogance and for looking down on others! "We are the people of the risen king!" in a quite different way. Make this a quiet affirmation - "yes, we belong! We all belong; Jesus, grace and the gospel are for everyone; this is "good news for me whoever *I* may be and good news for sharing with my neighbour whoever he or she may be". Say it in a way that knows we depend on God's grace and unfailing love; nothing of this we deserve, but God has blessed us; life is not perfect, indeed life is fairly messy at times, but God is still for us, His love is still unfailing, we still belong. If we had read Isaiah's words in his original we would have gone on to read of the transformation of the gospel on people's lives: *"To bestow..."* (Isaiah 61:3) This is gospel transformation; this is the way Jesus changes lives; this is the power of His grace and unfailing love.