

Epiphany 3, 23 January 2022, Pastor Matthew Anker

Sermon text: Luke 4:14-21

More than 20 years ago I climbed these very steps as a 4th year seminary student and entered this pulpit to preach publicly for the first time. Sitting in the pews were a large number of formidable, retired pastors. They included former seminary lecturers with reputations for being the hardest of task masters, along with faithful pastors who had toiled for more than 50 years and could sniff out any hint of poor theology from a mile. And so the Bethlehem pulpit had a reputation for being a daunting place.

For all of that, my experience preaching here as a student was a great joy and remarkably encouraging. Without exception those apparently formidable pastors embraced me and offered words of advice, encouragement and appreciation. What struck me at the time was that just like me, they came to church to simply hear the same message that Jesus proclaims in the synagogue in Nazareth in our text. A message of release from the captivity of sin, of freedom from the Devil's tyranny, and peace from fear of the grave. And they rejoiced to receive it even when it was proclaimed by a complete novice.

The same cannot be said of my attempts to share that same message of Christ's forgiving love with my own family and friends. When I have dared raise the topic, or sought to give an answer for the hope that I have in Christ, it is often met with awkward silence, averted gazes and a change in topic. While those close to me have never tried to throw me off a cliff as the Nazarenes did to Jesus after he preached the sermon we heard in our text, I have almost always felt a complete failure when it comes to sharing the faith with those who are close to me.

Perhaps you know what I'm talking about. Those who know us best, are often the ones who are least receptive when it comes to talking about the faith. And so it's interesting that in Luke's gospel, Jesus' first sermon is in front of a home town crowd where he lays out the mission he is accomplishing in their very midst. In some ways this text confirms the age old adage that mission starts at home.

But like I said our attempts at doing the same thing – speaking about Christ's mission with our unbelieving family and friends, can be a source of a great deal of guilt and shame. Whether it's the feeling of guilt we have as parents when our children reject the baptismal life that has been granted them, or the sense of shame we experience when we ignore the opportunities to speak of God's grace to those we know. Sometimes we keep our mouths closed out of fear for how we'll be received. And other times we wished we'd kept our mouths closed because we've made such a mess

of it. How is it for you? Do you fit in somewhere here? Do you know what I'm talking about when I speak of feeling you have failed in God's mission – especially with those who are closest to you?

As a pastor it's not my place to analyse whether or not you have a reason for such guilt and shame. Rather my job is to proclaim Good News to you who are poor in spirit due to the burden this brings upon you. To declare that Jesus has released you from captivity to this sin, along with its guilt. That He has covered your shame as He endured the world's scorn on the cross. And He has freed you as His own through the forgiveness that is yours in Christ. My job is to send you who have been broken by the burden of mission away from here today, released from all sin and shame in the name of Jesus and to live your life in the Lord's favour. However you have failed in the Lord's call to mission – you are forgiven. Whenever you have neglected the opportunities he has placed in front of you – His blood covers your sins. And wherever you feel you are responsible for another failing to believe, the Lord offers you freedom from your sins in the name of Christ.

As Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah in the hearing of his family and hometown friends, he declares that God's mission to bring just this kind of release and freedom and recovery has been fulfilled in him. Nothing more is to be done. No more waiting and worrying. No more anticipation and doubt. Right there in the person of Christ, God has sent salvation to the world and finally brought freedom from sin, death and the devil. Such is the essence of the church's mission. To continue to proclaim this same freedom to the world day in and day out. To point believers and unbelievers alike to Jesus' cross and declare that right there we are released from bondage to sin, granted freedom from the grave and given the gift of eternal life that we may live every day in the Lord's favour.

The picture Jesus uses is one of release from captivity and affliction and freedom from all work and toil. A picture that harks back to the 50 year Jubilee commanded in the Old Testament. A time when all slaves were set free, debts were forgiven, people returned to their homes and the paddocks lay fallow as they too rested for the year. The Jubilee was a prophetic sign of what was to come with the long awaited Saviour and a foretaste of the freedom that would be for all people as He ushered in the eternal year of the Lord's favour.

One of the reasons, I suspect, that this message of release from bondage is shunned by so many in a place like Australia, is that we don't readily recognise that we are captive to sin and death. Like the Israelites of old, we tend to think of ourselves as having never been slaves of anyone and so we don't need freeing.

When I travel on your behalf to visit the missions the LCA supports among our partner churches, the response is quite different. For people who live under the shadow of other religions such as Buddhism, Islam, animism and Hinduism, the sense of being held captive is very real and produces a longing for release. Far from turning their nose up at the suggestion we might have a message that will bring freedom and hope, they are so desperate for these things we tend to take for granted.

One of the most striking examples of this is captured in the story of a Lutheran evangelist who is now serving among his people in the mountains of northern Thailand. Min was born into a large family who continued the tradition of their ancestors and worshipped all kinds of spirits that surrounded them. Each home had their own spirit and the family was dependent on that spirit for all they needed – when things went well they offered sacrifices of thanksgiving, when things went badly, they had to offer more and more sacrifices to appease the spirit to get their lives back on track.

As a teenager Min noticed that something was not right with his siblings. They seemed disturbed and troubled. Following the accidental death of his father, Min's brother appeared deranged and committed suicide. Shortly after the family noticed one of his sisters was possessed by some evil spirit and ultimately hung herself as well. Another of Min's brothers became violent and with super human strength tore houses to pieces with his bare hands, swearing that he was assisted by 7 other men when witnesses saw him acting along. The village spirit doctor told the family their house spirit was bad and needed to be replaced. They sacrificed animal after animal to appease the spirits and placed a new idol in their home, but even that didn't work. Min became convinced he was at risk and ran away, spending days living in a tree and only coming down when he became convinced it was full of snakes that were trying to kill him. Witnesses could not see the snakes that were bothering him, but Min was tormented by these 'invisible' snakes for weeks to come.

This story of a family being held captive by spirits and driven to death and despair, probably sounds far fetched to your ears and yet is a story that is repeated again and again among the people you serve through LCA International Mission. Thanks be to God that a Christian evangelist came to Min and his family and proclaimed the very freedom, liberty, release and healing that Jesus spoke of as having been fulfilled in him all those years ago in the synagogue at Nazareth. As they were brought to faith in Jesus and received the gift of forgiveness of sins and release from demonic oppression, the family were finally at peace and the torment ceased. It was a battle that the spirits did not surrender to easily, but ultimately Min's family entered into that Jubilee year of the Lord's favour, being forgiven all debt and freed from all slavery, they now live in peace.

Min now proclaims the same gift of forgiveness and freedom in Jesus' name to those who are still held captive by darkness and fear. Not all believe. Some are threatened by the message and so fearful of the old spirits that they dare not listen to the message of the gospel. But Minh's life is living testimony to Jesus having fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah as he declared, and in the remote mountains of Thailand continues to bear witness to the freedom we have in Christ.

I haven't heard of too many people in the LCA who experienced Jesus' mission in quite the same way as Min, but the impact of his mission on our lives is no less spectacular. In the west the devil lulls us into a false sense of security as he seeks to possess us with a whole range of spirits who look anything but spiritual. We bow down at the altar of prosperity, family relationships and a good name. As a Roman Catholic author recently commented, we have tended to make idols out of safety and health, a comfortable instead of faithful life in the church and so on, and act as though these things will bring us ultimate freedom and happiness in life. It's the same lie as Min fell for in the mountains – that something other than Jesus can make us free – but it is just clothed a little differently.

In the face of all these spirits and our willing participation in their lies, Jesus proclaims victory through His death and resurrection, and declares with all authority in heaven and earth, that we are now free from such deathly captivity as he forgives our sins and covers our shame. This is what mission is all about. Bringing freedom, life, salvation and God's favour into the lives of those who are just as much prisoners of the devil as Minh and his family surely were.

The next time you feel fearful or apprehensive about telling friends and family about Jesus, stop for a moment and think of Jesus' declaration of release in the words of our text. These are words that are not just for those in remote Thailand. They are words for you and me and all who surround us, and who are far more burdened and imprisoned than they dare admit. In these words the mission of the church is fulfilled as God releases sinners from shame and death, and brings them into his everlasting favour. And yes it's true, some won't believe. Some may ridicule you. But then again, some will grasp this gift as Min did, desperate for the freedom and hope that Jesus' offers and that you have. May God grant you such joy in his gift of freedom and life in Jesus' name, that you embrace every opportunity to declare God's favour to those in need. Amen.