

“What It Means To Be Chosen”

25 July 2021 - Led by David Boyd

Welcome & Call To Worship

Hymn of Preparation: Come, Now Is The Time To Worship

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Luke 4:14-30

Sermon:

Imagine that Jesus walked into our service here, today. I think that if we recognized him then it's very likely that you wouldn't be too interested in listening to me anymore. I think we would ask him to speak to us, and I would go and sit down. We would all be dying to hear what he would say to us, wouldn't we?

Well, this is exactly the situation that our reading today describes. Jesus is back in Nazareth, his home town. He has just finished a successful preaching tour of the towns of Galilee where he has made a bit of a name for himself. He shows up at the local Synagogue, that he presumably attended as a boy, and is handed a scroll to read. We don't know whether he asked for the Isaiah scroll specifically, or whether the locals wanted to hear him preach from Isaiah.

Anyway, Jesus knows exactly where he's going with this, so he reads the first couple of verses from Isaiah 61, and then sits down to teach. Presumably that was the custom? It seems a bit strange to us, where I'm standing up, and you're all sitting. Anyway, he teaches them – That is, he delivered whatever the first century equivalent of a sermon was. And he begins by saying to them, ‘Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.’”

In the couple of chapters before our passage today, Luke describes the baptism, genealogy, and temptation of Jesus. They all highlight Jesus' identity: Jesus is Son of God by divine declaration, by his human descent from Adam the first son of God, and because even when tempted by Satan, he resists Satan's challenge to that identity. The Holy Spirit has descended on him and filled him. Now, in the power of the Spirit, Jesus begins his work, and he starts by laying out his manifesto.

By reading from Isaiah 61 and declaring the year of the Lord's favour, Jesus recalls the year of Jubilee. According to Leviticus 25, the year of Jubilee is a year of release. Every 50 years, God's people are to observe a Sabbath of Sabbaths: “you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.”

The law of Jubilee is designed to transform society and undo the damage that human greed has caused: it frees people who have been enslaved because of debt, and it returns land to its original owners so that every member of God's people has a way of earning a living. During the year of Jubilee all the people return to their property and their families. Both land and people rest, and the people live off what the land produces by itself.

Jesus is using the Year of Jubilee to preach freedom and transformation because that's what his mission is all about. Notice that Jesus does not separate economics from spirituality. The salvation that Jesus brings is holistic, it embraces spirit, soul, and body.

This all sounds like good news to his listeners and v.22 tells us that "all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.... Now as a preacher, this is pretty much what you want when you preach. You want people to enjoy the sermon, to get something out of it. Who doesn't enjoy some encouraging feedback? To be honest, if it was me, I would probably have left it at that. You know, quit while you're ahead. But Jesus never leaves a job half finished. He knows that there are some deep issues here that need addressing.

Those issues come to the surface when the crowd start asking, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" As questions go, it doesn't seem likely to cause a great deal of controversy, but surprisingly, Jesus is immediately on the attack.

²³ 'Surely you will quote this proverb to me: "Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your home town what we have heard that you did in Capernaum."

²⁴ 'I tell you the truth,' he continued, 'no prophet is accepted in his home town. ²⁵ I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. ²⁶ Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. ²⁷ And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed – only Naaman the Syrian.'

Now, what Jesus has just said is absolutely correct and corresponds with the accounts in 1 & 2 Kings. There is no doubt that it is meant as a rebuke and you might expect that there would be a bit of pushback from the crowd as nobody likes to get told off, but the reaction to Jesus' words seems out of all proportion to what's just been said.

The people are absolutely outraged. The passage doesn't give us the full picture, but it isn't hard to imagine the chaos that followed – the shouting, people taking sides, pushing and shoving. Perhaps, in our situation, if I said something that really got you going, you might chuck a few bibles at me. But even that doesn't capture the emotion here –

I doubt that even the most outraged members of Adelaide Road would seriously attempt to, say, throw me off Bray Head. But that's what these guys were intent on doing, they were so angry.

However, all their rage comes to nothing, because, the ending is a huge anti-climax, we're told that Jesus "walked right through the crowd and went on his way." (v.30)

It is, of course, all very unedifying, and we all think to ourselves: we would never do anything like that. If Jesus was preaching, we would just lap it all up. What on earth was wrong with those people?

Actually, that's a good question. What on earth was going on here? One minute all is sweetness and light and the next they are all going ballistic. What happened?

The key to the transition seems to be when the crowd ask "isn't this Joseph's son?" It seems a fairly innocuous question but what they actually mean by that is, "This is our neighbour's son. We brought him up. He's one of us. They are basking in his reflected glory and thinking, because of that association, that they're entitled to special treatment from him. It matches

well with the phrase in v.22 about everyone speaking well of him at first and provides an explanation for the sudden transition in what Jesus says.

That idea of local boy made good has led them to think that they have a claim on Jesus. You've done these amazing things everywhere else. Now you're home, we expect you to do something really impressive, because you *are one of us*. We brought you up. We're *entitled* to special treatment.

We are, after all, God's chosen people. And so we have certain expectations.

It also does a good job of explaining why Jesus uses the examples of the widow at Zarephath in Sidon and Naaman the Syrian. They are both outsiders – precisely those who don't think that they have a claim on God.

Neither of them are members of the "chosen people." They are Gentiles, or in the minds of Jesus' listeners, 'Gentile dogs.' The Jews considered them 'unclean,' they despised them, in their minds these are the last people on earth that God should be blessing.

So when Jesus points out that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time but Elijah was sent to the widow in Zarephath, it reverses the natural order of things.

Obviously, Elijah should have been sent to one of the widows in Israel rather than this Gentile widow. It's only common sense. She is not one of the chosen people. Do you see why Jesus' listeners find it so offensive? That's why they want to throw him off a cliff!

Which brings us to the question of the theological idea of election. What does it actually mean to be God's chosen people? To be called by God?

There are, broadly, two ways one can think about being called by God.

One of those ways is that God has chosen us in order to bless us, and as we have just seen, this was obviously the popular view in Nazareth. To be singled out by God, surely means to be under his special favour and protection? You can see this sort of thinking at work in New Testament times with what was expected of a messiah – that he would drive out the hated Romans and bring back the glory days to Israel. Perhaps lead them on to greater things even. It's one of the visions with which Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, the prospect of domination and power without cost.

And it's the way that Jesus rejected, finally when he said "if my kingdom was from this world then my followers would fight for me."

The other way of understanding calling is that you are chosen to *be* a blessing as much as to *receive* a blessing. Now that's not to reject the idea that being called includes being blessed – to be friends with the creator of the universe, the unending source of peace and joy and beauty, and to be invited to collaborate with him in his mission of restoring all things. What's not a blessing about that?

We are invited, in fact, to share Jesus' joy. As, for instance, Jesus promises in John 15, "*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*" Just think for a moment what it feels like, what it would feel like, to be "filled with the power of the Spirit" like Jesus was.

It sounds to me a bit like what Roger Federer must have felt like when he was playing tennis at the height of his powers. Totally focused as he moved around the court with effortless ease, striking the ball with laser-like precision while moving with the grace of a ballet dancer.

When he was in the zone he made a difficult game look ridiculously easy and he was, to all intents and purposes, unplayable.

But for Jesus that feeling was not just for one aspect of his life, like playing tennis, it was a whole of life experience. He felt like that in everything that he did. Imagine what it would feel like to live your whole life operating at the level that Roger Federer played tennis on his best day, knowing that you are collaborating with God in the deepest way possible.

But maybe this is making things less, rather than more, clear. If being a blessing is such a good experience, then who wouldn't want it? Well, the people Jesus was brought up with for a start. Or at least enough of them to make a pretty serious bid to throw him off a cliff.

You see, it's one thing to receive a gift. It's another thing to share the gift. Jesus' message of freedom and transformation sounded like good news to his hearers in Nazareth, at least if all that freedom and transformation is meant for them. But when Jesus reminds them that God's love extends beyond their borders, that Elijah helped a woman from Sidon and Elisha healed a hated Syrian, they conclude that his message is really bad news.

In order to accept his teaching, they would have to change their attitudes toward outsiders. They would have to include people they routinely exclude. They would have to believe that God's salvation is for the Gentile dogs too, and not just for them. That is more transformation than Jesus' hometown hearers can handle. In their eyes to be God's chosen people meant God was there to bless them and them alone. That's why Jesus' determination to put them straight almost gets him killed.

Do you see the point I'm trying to make? It's one thing to be given your whole life as a gracious gift – but quite another to give it up for others. There's a paradox here. As Jesus puts it in Matt. 16, *"If you want to save your own life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for my sake, you will find it."*

Let me read a few verses from 1 Corinthians 13. *"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."* You have probably heard that read at every wedding you have ever been to. It makes us feel all warm and fuzzy, doesn't it? The whole wedding vibe means we associate it with celebration and good times.

But what does love actually look like in practice? As Christians we say: it looks like Jesus. Yet here Jesus doesn't sound that patient nor, frankly, kind. Though it does seem to relate to the bit about *"it does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth."*

Jesus knew what had to be said, and he said it. And, of course, that is kinder in the long run. If his old neighbours really were believing something that was in fact cutting them off from God, then better to tell them than not.

Of course, I am not advocating becoming one of those irritating people who pride themselves on telling people hard truths. What makes them irritating is both their self-righteousness, and their distance from the situation which they are criticising. To stand

at a distance pointing out the faults in others can be a way of deflecting self-criticism. Of distracting everyone, especially myself, from my own faults.

In fact, it can be the opposite of love.

To relate this to our passage we might come up with something like this. As one of God's chosen, I can be tempted to think that lets me off the hook, to kind of sit back and relax. To indulge in what Bonhoeffer calls "cheap grace."

But to be chosen by God, is more than just being let off the hook in some judgement day court-case. It is being freed and empowered for action. The ideal, the aim, is to be like Jesus. To be able to love people deeply – so deeply that you want what really is best for people. And to have the internal resources – to be "filled with the power of the Spirit" – to be able to say what needs to be said, or do what needs to be done, purely for the benefit of the other, and to bear the cost. Which, hopefully, won't always be people trying to throw you off a cliff.

So I guess my closing question is this: How do you react to the problem of this passage. What does it mean to *you* to be elected, chosen, loved by God? And then, the related question, what does that mean for us here in Dublin, in 2021?

Praise: Rescuer

Prayers for Others

Announcements

Closing Hymn: How Deep The Father's Love For Us

Benediction