

## Sermon Preached at Grafton Cathedral 23 January 2022

*Third Sunday After Epiphany*

Dr Murray Harvey, Bishop of Grafton



In September 1752, Britain changed over from the Julian calendar to the modern calendar – the Gregorian calendar (the one we use today), bringing Britain into line with most of Europe.

The change had been necessary because there had been an 11 day discrepancy between both calendars. So that year, to effect the change, the 2<sup>nd</sup> September was followed by the 14<sup>th</sup> September.

Surprisingly, this calendar change was wildly unpopular - as the story goes, furious mobs rioted throughout England on the night the changes took effect.

People thought that they'd been robbed of 11 days! Some even thought that their lives would be shortened by 11 days! In the English Calendar riots, people shouted, "Give us back our 11 days!"

An interesting snippet of history which serves to illustrate how important time is. Time is important, "today" is a gift!

By his own admission, the Spirit was upon Jesus as he stood in the Synagogue to read from Isaiah.

By emphasizing the word "today," Jesus transformed Isaiah's words, Isaiah's prophecy, into a powerful invitation for the whole community to act now for God's justice.

Diana Butler Bass has paraphrased today's reading as:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon us,*

*because he has anointed us*

*to bring good news to the poor.*

*He has sent us 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.*

According to Luke's account, the congregation was shocked! What do you mean that the Spirit of the Lord is HERE? Now? Today? That the poor hear good news, that prisoners are being released, the blind see, and the oppressed receive justice, now? *This* is the year of Lord's favour?

"*Today* this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Not yesterday, not tomorrow. Today.

And with that, Jesus' furious neighbours tried to throw him off a cliff.

The Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus at his baptism (3:22) then leads him into the wilderness where he is tempted by the devil for 40 days and nights (4:1-2). Filled with the power of the Spirit, Jesus returns to his home country of Galilee (4:14).

The words Jesus speaks in Nazareth are especially important because they are the first words we hear of his public ministry in Luke's Gospel. So this is an inaugural address of sorts. What Jesus says here represents the heart of his message and mission.

What he is saying is that Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in him. Projecting this vision into a distant future is no longer possible.

Like other faith communities, we in the Anglican Church struggle with time.

“The wheels of the church move slowly, the wheels of the diocese, or of this or that parish, move even slower” – how many times have I heard that one?

“Nothing much changes around here Vicar”

“We’ve tried that before Vicar”

Faith communities are often consumed with memories of the past. Speaking of the past may take a form of maintaining buildings and structures, of teaching ancient texts, and passing on patterns of life and values from ancestors.

Speaking of the future is often wrapped up in hopes for what we’re going to do one day when we get that new Rector, or new roof, or that vibrant youth group. Hopes for the children to hold onto faith or "come back to church."

Don’t get me wrong, both past and future are important to vibrant communities; healthy and life-giving practices of honouring our forbears and embracing a hopeful future derive from the witness of the whole biblical and faith tradition.

But both "past" and "future" as the primary location of faith are problematic. Overemphasizing the past results in nostalgia--the belief that the past is better than either the present or the future--a disposition that is steeped in grief and fear. Overemphasizing the future--the belief that all that matters is that which is to come--often results in thwarted hope, doubt, and anxiety.

A recent survey (from Public Religion Research) discovered that the majority of churchgoers in the United States express high levels of both nostalgia and anxiety. By strong majorities church people believe that "our best days are behind us" and that the future of society is bleak.

In particular, mainline congregations are caught between valorizing the good old days and a deepening sense of desolation that some promised future will never arrive.

Despite Jesus’ emphasis on the importance of today, church communities are often tied up in yesterday, or tomorrow. Today (writes Butler Bass) is lost. Today is merely a stage upon which we mourn the loss of past and fear what we cannot imagine.

Maybe that's because the kind of "today" of which Jesus speaks in Luke is a dangerous reality. The kind of today of which Jesus speaks insists that we lay aside both our memories and our dreams to embrace fully the moment of now.

The past romanticizes the work of our forebears and the future depends upon future generations to fix everything. But "today" places *us* in the midst of the sacred drama, reminding us that we are now God's actors and agents in God's desire for the world.

"Good news to the poor", and the "year of the Lord's favour" sound great until we realise he means now, today. Not in future generations. Jesus' talk of a radical redistribution of property and wealth, for example, will not sound like good news to many of us who live comfortable lives and do not want to give up what we have. The idea of welcoming certain groups of people into our communities will be unsettling for some, especially

What does this look like for us? Amongst other things Covid 19 has revealed deep divisions in our societies: economic, ethnic and geographical inequalities. As a member of the Anglican Communion's Community Health Network, I've been involved in campaigns for vaccine equity – this is an urgent social justice issue now. While vaccination levels and vaccine availability in countries like ours are good, in other places such as Africa and South America, the majority of the population hasn't even had their first dose. Self interest says that until they're fully vaccinated, new variants will continue to emerge from amongst unvaxed populations and threaten us. But of course the main reason we need to get them vaccinated is because we don't want them to get the virus, especially because medical care in most of those countries is either non-existent or poorly resourced.

Will today's hearers of Jesus call for justice receive this message as good news, or will they respond like the hometown crowd in Nazareth, fearing the loss of privileged position? Sadly, Big Pharma and other vested interests work against equity, preferring profit instead of justice.

In our commitment to justice now, let's be inspired by Nehemiah. In Ch 8 verse 10 we read that "the joy of the Lord is our strength".

The walls of Jerusalem were in ruins. The great temple was a mound of rubble. The countryside was a wasteland. The hard-nosed administrator Nehemiah and a scribe named Ezra stepped up in their "today" and organized a series of urban renewal projects that included building a new temple and new city walls.

May the joy of the Lord be our strength too!

With its focus on the present, today's reading is particularly relevant for us as we consider the Vacancy Consultation. Looking back, we can see that the last five years have been a time of tremendous activity: restored baptistry roof, restored organ, restored Chapel roof, renovated vestry, hi tech Livesteaming equipment. Dean Greg wasn't one for putting off until tomorrow, what could be done today. So we are well placed, having achieved much in recent years. Yet Covid did put some plans on hold. Because of Covid, the green shoots of children and youth ministry didn't flourish.

What are our opportunities today? What are our challenges?

The restructuring for Mission and Ministry has offered opportunities: we now only have one centre of worship, so less of a financial and ministry burden. Also, the model is there for a ministry Network in the Clarence Valley, so that we can work together across Grafton, South Grafton and Maclean.

Living in God's promise is not about yesterday. Nor is it about awaiting some distant Messiah and eternal life in the Kingdom of God. It is about NOW. This is a hard truth to hear and receive. Jesus' friends refused. They would rather stay mired in nostalgia and complain about the future. How great the prophets were! If only a saviour would appear and get us out of this mess!

But Jesus' sermon remains as clear, poignant, important and urgent as ever: *Today* this promise has been fulfilled in our hearing--what we need is here. Today. Let's be attuned to his will in our individual and corporate lives.

Lord, grant us this day a passion for justice, a clear knowledge of your will for us and for this Cathedral community as we meet today for discernment in the Vacancy Consultation, and a desire to follow you wherever you may lead; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.