

Epiphany III, 2025 – Luke 4:14-21 and 1 Corinthians 12

'The journey to reclaim our republic has not been an easy one — that, I can tell you. Those who wish to stop our cause have tried to take my freedom and, indeed, to take my life.

Just a few months ago, in a beautiful Pennsylvania field, an assassin's bullet ripped through my ear. But I felt then and believe even more so now that my life was saved for a reason. I was saved by God to make America great again.'

Don't worry, that's enough Trump for one morning.

I quote the President's second inaugural address just to make a very simple contrast.

Presidents aren't the only ones who make inaugural speeches – speeches which set the agenda, which define what they're all about, which explain what's going to happen next.

Preachers make inaugural speeches. Jesus made one: we've just heard it, in that passage from Luke 4, which is often called the Nazareth Manifesto. Just like Trump, he wanted to tell us what he was about. And, like Trump, he said that it was God's business. But that is pretty much where the comparisons end. Because what is that business? Not to make Israel great again. No. This:

'He anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, the recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

Good news to the poor. Release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed: the year of the Lord's favour.

That's what God's about, says Jesus. That's why I'm here.

So when people come using the language of God, and they're actually sending you in the opposite direction – when it is all about ego and greed, fear and violence, when the weak are getting crushed, and the poor are getting poorer, well you can be pretty sure it's not the God of Jesus Christ they're talking about.

What is the good news, at the most very basic level? It's this. You are not rubbish. No matter what this world makes of you, no matter how poor you are, how unsuccessful, how weak, how flawed, how guilty, how blind, how stupid, how tired, how flat ... you are not rubbish. As the prophet Isaiah said, 'you are a royal diadem, a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord'. You – each and every one of you – are worth the world. You are worth more than that: you're worth Jesus Christ on the Cross. That's how much God wants you back. That's what He gave to rescue us from all that beats us down. And all that beats us down – all the sin, all the death, all the evil – it will one day, because of what he did there, be done with. We will reach that promised land. We can't say exactly what it will be like, any more than we can stare into the sun But everyone who has been crushed will be restored. All those lives tossed away, despised, treated like rubbish: because of Jesus Christ, they will be nursed back into glory. Those who have been ruined will be restored; and those who did the ruining will meet the perfect union of justice and mercy which is Jesus Christ.

That's the Gospel. And in our New Testament reading, from 1 Corinthians 12, Paul tries to sketch out what it means for how we live now. The Church is the people who believe the Gospel. Who believe, really and truly, that each one of us is a royal diadem in the hand of God. That each one of us, no matter what this world thinks of us, is of infinite value and dignity, and is headed for glory. And who not only believe that, but act as if it is so. Who treat each other as the ones we really are: the beloved children of God. Where we renounce all talk of being better, more successful, more important than each other, all sense of competing with each other, and focus simply on how we can help each other, how we can serve each other. How we can treat each other like the glory we are becoming.

And this is not just saying that we should look after other people. More excitingly, it's saying that we should expect them to look after us. Or, rather, it means that everyone but everyone is capable of contributing something, has some way of helping us all flourish. No-one is there to be simply passive, simply receiving, simply an object of others' care. People aren't things. They're gifts, gifts to each other. Even those who we don't think can give anything at all – say the profoundly disabled, or the dying – Christianity says, if you live with them deeply enough you will find something in how they are which you *need*. Perhaps the reminder that being strong, being successful, being competent is not what being human is about. Everyone can give. That's why it has always been a mark of authentic Christianity that no-one gets thrown overboard. No-one is worthless: we don't give people suicide pills but build hospitals and hospices instead, because everyone has something to give.

So the question Luke 4 and 1 Corinthians 12 have to pose to each of us is: what are you giving? How are you helping the other people here grow into glory? What is your gift? And I don't just mean what are you giving in the planned giving scheme, though that is very important (and you'll hear much more about it next month). I don't mean whether you're on coffee rotas or giving people a lift rotas or whatever – though all that is also extremely important. There is a more basic and even more important question. It's about your fundamental attitude. Why are you here? Why are you part of the Church? We so readily think, 'because I like it', or 'because I get so much from it' or because 'it helps me be in touch with God.' All of which is good and important, but is not quite up to the level of the New Testament. 1 Corinthians 12 says be part of the church because there's something that only you can give, there's a gift that only you have, that other people need. And it's not your money, it's not even your talent, it's *you*. You are God's gift to the people around you. *You* are the only way *we* get to be how he made us. You – unremarkable, unimpressive *you* – you are that important, that precious, that necessary.

So please, this year, with all your heart and soul and mind and strength: join in. Be yourself, with us -week after week, event after event, one shared life. Let's grow close together this year, and one day, together, we will reach the Promised Land.

Amen.

