

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 23 January 2022

Lord God, let the words of your servant's mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer. Through Christ, Amen.

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Luke 4:14-21

Fulfilling scriptures in our hearing

In both readings, we can see a few similar things, such as scripture reading in a public setting, a reader who is either a public figure or less known to people, and the audience. In Nehemiah, when people heard the words of the law with interpretation by Ezra, who was the scribe and priest, they wept.¹ In Luke, when people heard the words of Isaiah² read by Jesus, “the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.”³ Although they were amazed at his gracious words, they talked about Jesus’ humble background later. On the surface, Scripture seemed to be fulfilled in Nehemiah rather than in Luke. We will see if it is the case through Jesus and the life of the church.

Jesus

When it is the Sabbath, Jesus goes to the synagogue. He is handed the scroll of Isaiah, and he opens it. By the Holy Spirit, he chooses what he wants to read from. The reading Isaiah 61:1-2 is a proclamation in that the presence of God’s Spirit and the work for which the ‘me’ has been anointed, but the identity of ‘me’ is not revealed. Still, we gather that it is a prophecy for the promise of a king who would heal the divisions between Israel and Judah and rule with righteousness.⁴ Also it is the promise of the release and righteousness to be carried out by God’s servant,⁵ and the Lord’s Spirit will stay in everlasting covenant with all Israel.⁶ Therefore the opening announcement of Isaiah 61 underscores God’s initiative in providing for and speaking to Israel in days past and the present. When he finishes reading, Jesus sits down as teachers do. Then he explains the Scripture by telling them that today when they hear the Scripture read, it is fulfilled in their presence. For people, it may not be what they expect him

¹ Nehemiah 8:9

² Isaiah 61:1-2

³ Luke 4:20

⁴ Isaiah 11:2-5

⁵ Isaiah 42:1-9

⁶ Isaiah 59:21

to say, as Jesus is technically saying that he himself will be the location for the fulfilment of this prophecy.

In previous chapters, we hear that in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is the one who has been anointed to preach and proclaim the good news of God. Jesus will travel from town to town, and wherever he goes, he will teach and heal, living out the good news so that people can see the salvation that God offers. Even so, Jesus says that reading the Scripture in their hearing is necessary for the fulfilment of the Scripture. What does it mean?

First, the Spirit of God is upon Jesus. The main activity of the Spirit's purpose in anointing is "bringing good news to the poor." The captives, the blind, and the oppressed are all people who live in certain poverty⁷ that can only be resolved by God. As such, God sent the anointed one by the Spirit of the Lord to them to enact good things for them. It is when the captives are declared released, the oppressed are sent to their freedom, and the blind are given their sight back. The words of God have the power to change things, and Jesus Christ is the manifestation of God's favour to the world. His reading of Isaiah confirms that Jesus is the anointed and the work he has been doing is what the anointed must do.

Second, the fulfilment of the Scripture involves believers' hearing by which their lives are charged with the Word of God as they are subjects to God's sovereignty. When Jesus reads the Scripture, the living Word in person is standing before them even though they are not able to recognize him as such. Yet the power of God's Word doesn't necessarily depend on human understanding. Once it is proclaimed, it shall accomplish that God purpose, and succeed in the thing for which God sent it.⁸

Third, when Jesus says that he has 'fulfilled' this Scripture, the perfect tense is used. It means that Jesus has accomplished it with lasting effects. It is the summary of all that Jesus will teach or do, invite people to experience and encourage his disciples to engage and spread as they (and also we) proclaim the good news.

The church

⁷ πτωχός – poor (in an absolute sense)

⁸ Isaiah 55:11 – so shall my Word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

In our story time, we played a children's game, 'Chinese whispers.' Initially, a Greek sentence was given to the participants, and no one seemed to deliver it correctly to their neighbours. The second time, an English translation was given, and it relatively went well. If it is not whispered but spoken loudly, it might be easier to share the message as everyone may hear the words at the same time. Even so not all can hear the words clearly, and they can help one another. We understand and learn Scripture better when we share the meaning of the message through one another. Scripture remains foreign to people unless it is proclaimed through our entire lives.

In Nehemiah 8, when Ezra read and explained the Word of God, they stood in rapt attention, hanging on Ezra's every Word. They need the interpretation to understand it fully. The people had been so moved, so convicted, so arrested by Ezra's explications and readings, they were weeping. Ezra told them not to "mourn," for that day was holy to the Lord, and the joy of the Lord was their strength.⁹ Even so, the understanding itself wasn't enough to transform them into living words.

As the Word incarnate, Jesus was the fulfilment of scriptures through his life, liberating good news message and work. He also images the invisible God¹⁰ and is the embodied good news who invites us to be embodied reconcilers and ambassadors of God's Kingdom. We – the church has received the same Spirit that was upon Jesus so Jesus' salvific work will continue through us. When we do, our individual lives are the stories of our liberation to others in that how we have been released from poverty, what we are now able to see. Through this, we become living words of God that describe what the Lord's favour looks and feels and sounds like individually and collectively. We know that it is who we are. Amen.

⁹ Nehemiah 8:10

¹⁰ Colossians 1:15-20