

## Bible Reflection for Mission Gathering at Westcott House, 5<sup>th</sup> June 2006

### *Collect for Weekdays after Pentecost:*

O Lord, from whom all good things come:  
Grant to us your humble servants,  
That by your holy inspiration  
We may think those things that are good,  
And by your merciful guiding may perform the same;  
Through our Lord Jesus Christ,  
Who is alive and reigns with you,  
In the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
One God, now and for ever. AMEN

### *Reading from Luke 4 vv14-22*

Luke 4:

14 Then Jesus filled with the power of the Spirit returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

18 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,

19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' 22

### Reflection:

In 1995 and facing the prospect of an untimely death the social philosopher Gillian Rose decided to write a short autobiography which became the bestselling *Love's Work*. It was amongst the most unusual and arresting of a spate of autobiographies published in the last few years about living with the onset of sudden unexpected illness. Rose, who had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer in her mid 40's decided that she would use the motif of *Love's Work* to reflect on the experience of living with cancer and her search for healing. The story she came to tell became a mesmerising and beautiful story of the physicality of a life lived to the full made meaningful through the experiences of friendship, passion, risk, and failure each of which is woven in and out of each chapter of her life. But for those who had eyes to see it there was another level to this story. This deeply moving tale of the wounding and healing, loving and failing of one human body was also mapped and plotted so that it told the story of the collective body, of the social and political times we live in – of our corporate brokenness and anxiety and yet hope for fulfilment. The epigram which frames the book and turned out to be the very last words she wrote in her notebook on the morning she died were 'Keep your mind in Hell and Despair Not'. These words were borrowed from an Orthodox Holy Man who lived on Mount Athos between the two world wars and who, traumatised by the mass destruction he witnessed, committed himself to praying ceaselessly for the healing, reconciliation and release from captivity of a broken and fractured world, in other words that we might receive the Kingdom of God. For Rose this refrain 'Keep Your Mind in Hell and Despair Not' expressed her experience of a spirituality and politics 'written on the body'.

We've just heard read this morning Luke's passage which speak of the Mission of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God as it is 'written on the body' of Jesus Christ and of our neighbour.

What I have chosen to share with you this morning are simply the reflections that have struck me as I have wondered about a spirituality and politics of the Mission that takes seriously both our urgent response to the brokenness of this world and the promise embodied in the crucified, resurrected and now ascended Jesus Christ.

After the dramatic build up of the previous passages in Luke's Gospel in which Jesus has been baptised by John in the Jordan, and tempted by the devil, we are presented this morning with the first scene of Jesus' public ministry. For the first time in Luke's Gospel we hear directly from Jesus in his own words and these opening words become the anchor point for the understanding of Jesus' mission and ultimately our understanding of the promise of salvation: 'the spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, release to the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour'. Jesus is offering us here a re-interpretation of Isaiah and Leviticus on the theme of jubilee which he is now claiming as his own motif. But the Jesus of Luke's Gospel 'turns' the Old Testament emphasis so that the jubilee themes of judgement and redistribution become themes of release and of compassion. The spiritual emphasis and content of Christian mission becomes first and last one of release. Jesus is proclaiming not just social and political release now, but the final great jubilee, the new era of the Kingdom

One of the things that makes this passage so striking is the emphasis on physical, bodily conditions – blindness, captivity, those with broken minds - what seems to be implied is that we will come to understand the Kingdom partly through our basic bodily practices, our everyday experience of as Rowan Williams has expressed it 'the body's grace' and more particularly as this passage suggests our embodied practices of giving and forgiving.

I want to explore briefly four key salvation themes from this passage that I think are found through the body's grace and give us 'hints and guesses' of Mission held in relation to the Kingdom which is both in our midst and yet to come: In RS Thomas' image: a long way off but taking no time at all to get to.

The first and most stark salvation theme is that of status reversal. The poor, the sick, the lonely, those who weep, will all find their places in the Kingdom. It is clear that Luke does not limit the poor to the economically poor, but rather the poor are understood according to changing context in terms of *status* and *power*. To ask the question 'who are the poor' in our parishes, university and broader nation as well as more generally in an age of high technology, mass migration and ecological fragility we will need to ask who is excluded through the denial of status and power. At a national level in the last two weeks we have heard from Archbishop Rowan of the symbol of our collective poverty to be found in the economic, social and political reality of Africa. David Attenborough, long a sceptic of Global Warming has added his voice to the growing chorus of those warning of ecological disaster, not as an apocalyptic inevitability but as a very real consequence if we do not examine our lives and commit to change. What is clear in Luke is that in the person of Jesus Christ these horizons swing open and as the excluded are included and we are asked to contemplate a new spaciousness found in Jesus Christ. This story of reversal is described by Walter Bruggeman as the 'counterworld of the evangelical imagination'. Jesus repeatedly steps across the boundary that separates clean from unclean with acts of release and restoration to the fullness of community which makes room for all and it is pretty clear that we are called to do the same.

The second salvation theme I want to push a little is that of *compassion*. Luke presents us with a ministry of deep compassion. Jesus tells us directly that his mission is to and for the poor but Luke does not tell us of his *evangelizing* the poor, instead he is continually in the company of the marginalised and excluded using the gift of *healing* of body and mind as the tangible and urgent sign of the presence of God's kingdom amongst them. Luke is clear that despite John the Baptist's rather dour scepticism, this is primarily a ministry of *compassion* and not as John had expected of *judgement*. As someone involved in teaching and practising pastoral care what I find so attractive about this is that the nature of the end times and of the Kingdom in Luke coheres beautifully with this ministry of compassion. In Luke we do not find the image of violent overthrow or apocalyptic terror at the end of time but rather the sensuous image of the consummation of the great wedding feast in which with our earthly status reversed all participate arrayed in our bridal garments of joy.

The third salvation theme in Luke's passage that cannot be ignored is the persistent emphasis on TODAY – 'today this scripture is fulfilled in your presence', we are told. The importance and value of Today is proclaimed over and over again in Luke. This emphasis might be read firstly as the material task of attending to our neighbour in need, emphasising that suffering requires immediate practical response. But beyond this Luke is pointing to the abundance of Today, to Now as the time of promise and fulfilment if we are able to grasp it, to find room in our lives to respond to the invitation..

The final salvation theme I am struck by is the hidden but crucial emphasis on forgiveness in this passage. The Hebrew jubilee is re-formed here into Greek as release: *release* for debtors, *release* for captives, *release* for the downtrodden (or as I think the more literal translation would have it: for those broken in pieces). Interestingly, Luke uses the Greek *aphesis* (in Latin *remissio*) to express both release but also forgiveness of sins, holding together a sense of letting go, and setting right.

To forgive and to be forgiven, however hard this is, is to be released, to be freed. *Aphesis* standing in unity for both release and forgiveness in this passage comes to mean wholeness, freedom and acceptance. So salvation and our participation in mission requires that we understand that giving and forgiving ultimately belong together and that if we have courage to let it this becomes a profoundly graceful rhythm in our lives.

But this is where we need to pause and to remember the astonishing complexity of human practices of giving and forgiveness lest we become glib about this. We need to name directly the danger of constructing a 'safe' Christian world which cannot quite risk looking reality in the face. The Croat theologian Miroslav Volf in his latest book on forgiveness and grace includes a postlude to this text in which he enters into a risky dialogue with a skeptic: Here is a short, sharp extract from their conversation:

*"I don't mean to dis it. It's beautiful of course, your vision of a life of generosity and forgiveness is beautiful – beautifully unreal. Remember the movie 'Life is Beautiful?', in it, there was a kid in a concentration camp, Giosue, whose father created for him an illusion of living a normal life by pretending that the whole thing was an elaborate game. The life you describe is beautiful in that way, as an ingenious ruse"*

*Volf replies "I think I know what you mean but..."*

*"When you look at how we actually live" he continued, "when I think about how we are wired to live, all that talk about unselfish generosity and forgiveness makes no sense. We play a game of giving and forgiving, but the game was designed to mask a harsh reality that we are afraid to look at unadorned. We all just strive to maximize our profits, by whatever means society will let us get away with. We 'give' to get; we 'forgive' when it's in our interest. That is all there is – our profit, our interest, our insatiable egos. We are bundles of sophisticated, complex matter, each bundle hustling to survive and thrive, sometimes with others' help, but mostly at others expense. And then we cover the tracks of our selfishness by 'giving' and 'forgiving'."*

PAUSE

"You have stripped us naked, with our clothes off we are not a pretty sight" Volf replies.

"Keep your mind in hell and despair not" Gillian Rose and the Orthodox hermit might say in response.

Whether our account of human nature matches that of Volf's sceptic or not we must be prepared to look unflinchingly at our poverty, both as individuals and as a community. What I remain touched by in this passage from Luke is the stark message of reversal and release: that in order to prepare to receive the Kingdom we must look ourselves straight in the face, strip ourselves and our practices in order that like a vine stripped back to its very roots we might begin to bear fruit that will last. In the words of the Pentecost hymn to 'fructify'. This is a sense of reversal we find in the desert fathers as well as at the heart of the Magnificat and the Beatitudes, of stripping off self absorption and putting on Christ – these mission-shaped practices become the lasting fine garments we will wear to serve at the Kingdom feast.

In the end Miroslav Volf exhorts his sceptical friend to embrace the compassionate Kingdom practices of open-armed giving and forgiving, by encouraging him to think of slipping into an ethical way of life as one might think of slipping into a church building or more metaphorically a garment of beauty he says "I want you to sit in [this way of life], or rather, walk around inside it for a while. You might just discover the living God – not at the end of an argument, but in the midst of a life well lived." The coming of the Kingdom of God comes precisely as the possibility of transformation, and yes, it is in some sense a counterworld, but not an imaginary 'safe' world in the way of Volf's sceptic. We can only receive this good news if we are aware of the need for change, liberation and transformation in ourselves and our world. This happens when we are able to place our selves before God open armed and vulnerable. This is the Good News 'written on the body' of Christ, Crucified, resurrected and ascended and on our own bodies and those of our neighbour. And as we await the descent of the Spirit, it becomes our shared Love's Work.