

Sermons

Date: 24 January 2010 *Epiphany 3* Parish Eucharist
Preacher: Rev'd Ian Yates
Theme: Jesus's Manifesto
Reading: Luke 4, v 14-21



Most significant birthdays end in a nought, thirty, forty, fifty, and so on. But there are three that don't: eighteen, twenty-one, and the one that I'm celebrating today. When I asked if I could preach this morning my colleagues graciously and selflessly agreed. Then I went home and looked to see what the readings would be, and when I saw the gospel reading I couldn't believe my luck. It was almost enough to make me believe in the kind of providence that I don't believe in.

Over the next few weeks you're going to be hearing the word "manifesto" rather a lot, I'm afraid. All the political parties are going to be telling us what they'll do if only we'll let them. Page after page after page of the stuff. We'll probably have differing views about how honest it all is, and how likely any of it is to happen, but I suspect we'll all of us be mighty bored with it by the time the election happens.

The best part of twenty years ago, it struck me in the run-up to the 1992 General Election that each of the four Gospels has a manifesto, too: a passage quite near the beginning where the Gospel writer spells out for us what it is that Jesus is going to do, provided that he's given the chance. The Gospel reading this morning is Matthew's manifesto for Jesus. Because the Spirit of the Lord is upon him, Jesus is going to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to proclaim recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

That's the manifesto promises; that's what Jesus committed himself to. And, unlike many a politician's manifesto that we could all think of, when we look at Jesus's manifesto with the benefit of hindsight we can see that it wasn't a load of old rubbish, cobbled together just to get everyone's support with never a chance of it's being carried through. That manifesto describes what Jesus went on to do; he did what it says on the tin.

But there's more than that. There are fashions in Church life, with great ideas coming into fashion and then going out of fashion again as the years go on. The things that we emphasise above other things tend to change as the years go on. What seems striking and powerful to one generation seems old hat to the next generation, because the next generation has found something else striking and powerful. So, to a younger and different generation to mine, what I'm going to say now may seem out of fashion and old hat, but that doesn't stop it being true for me.

That manifesto spoke particularly powerfully through a chunk of the twentieth century, and to me and my contemporaries training for ministry forty years ago. It still seems to me to be a pretty good summing up of what Jesus went on to do in his ministry: the preaching, the healing, and what came to be derided as the social gospel, but is really about God at work in the communities in which we humans live. It's all there, in the manifesto and in the work of Jesus.

And it set for many of us a pattern for ministry for the Church, for its clergy, and for all who want to follow Christ in their daily living. Preaching, healing, and doing God's work in our communities.

I began my ministry in what we now call Zimbabwe, but in those days it was governed by a white racist regime that called it Rhodesia. Every Sunday, I would lead worship and preach with an English-speaking congregation, and then get in the car and go off and lead worship and preach once, twice or even three times with Shona-speaking congregations. There'd be the usual pastoral work of

healing and supporting with the congregations that were in my care - about twenty of them. And then there'd be all the stuff about trying to witness to a better way of life in that country, and encouraging the signs of hope - about trying to live prophetically: proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free.

After that a couple of years in Stoke Newington in North London. Leading worship and preaching twice every Sunday morning and often once in the evening; the pastoral, healing work; and trying to open up the Church communities and their buildings to the people who lived around them, and especially the young people.

Then five years as a chaplain in a hostel for merchant seamen during the time when the British merchant navy fleet was rapidly disappearing, and we became home for unemployed, and often unemployable, merchant seamen - up to 180 of them. An early-morning service in the chapel every week-day, preaching a couple of times a month in the Church next door, and being the person whose job it was to help the seamen when they needed it. Oh, and getting on the telly and managing to delay the closing of the Seamen's Hospital in Greenwich for a few years.

And then, until a year ago, twenty-six years working for Housing Associations that catered for people with special needs - alcoholism, other kinds of drug abuse, mental illness, homelessness, and so on; the first six years working at the coal face with clients, and the next twenty working in the finance departments. Which I like to think pretty well fits the manifesto quite apart from the preaching and stuff that I still did a couple of times a month.

Sometimes I say, because it's true, that I think that in the whole of my ministry no-one has ever become a Christian because of anything that I've said or done. But I'd like to think that, over the years, my preaching has helped people to understand their faith a bit better and has challenged them to live their faith a bit better; and I'd like to think the poor have heard a bit of the good news, and the blind have been able to see a little bit, and the oppressed have felt a little bit freer.

And I'd like to think that this morning, in telling you a bit about what makes my Christian ministry tick, I've encouraged you to think a bit about what makes your Christian life tick, so that you can clothe that manifesto with your own flesh:

*"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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."*