

Isaiah 61: 1-4; 8-11

Luke 1: 46-55

Have you ever had to appear before a group of people, large or small and make a very significant announcement?

Perhaps for some it was when you told your parents that you were getting married or when you came home to advise and celebrate a big promotion at work. These days for many of us it is more likely to be when you advise that you are downsizing and moving to a retirement village!!

In my many years working for the Human Rights Commission I regularly made "announcements." In this role I was often interviewed on television or found myself speaking to large and diverse audiences and I was always well aware that not everyone would agree with my message.

In both our readings today significant announcements are being made. In the reading from Isaiah the writer records the prophet saying "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the poor, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

This is quite a claim--to claim that "the Lord has anointed me" to do these things might well be something easily disputed by those listening. These words were originally addressed to the people of Israel who had suffered during the Babylonian Exile around 590 BCE and were intended to inspire hope for those who were despairing and convince them that God would act to restore and renew them.

These same words from Isaiah were those read by Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth where, according to Luke at Chapter 4 Jesus makes the astounding announcement that "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." A very big announcement indeed and one that provoked the crowd to attempt to throw Jesus over a cliff. So much for making far reaching statements.

Then when we turn to our reading today from the first chapter of Luke we have Mary, in the early stages of her pregnancy, announcing to her cousin Elizabeth the poetic statement that has become known as the *Magnificat*.

Mary's *Magnificat* is recorded only in Luke's Gospel and is often sung during worship services in this Advent season. The writer of Luke portrays Mary as the singer of this song of reversals and the interpreter of the contemporary events taking place.

Mary certainly makes some far-reaching statements. From now on all generations will call me blessed, she says and there is no doubt that in many quarters of the Christian Church, Mary is very big indeed. So that promise has been fulfilled.

But Luke, through Mary, then speaks about a series of reversals that are to happen---the proud will be scattered, rulers will be brought down from their thrones and the humble will be lifted up. The hungry will be filled with good things and the rich will be sent empty away.

So what do we make of this---this is pretty radical stuff, in fact revolutionary---it could even be said to be scary/ threatening. Do we really think that God is working towards a *massive* reversal of how things are? Taken at face value this is the sort of thing which most of our politicians (and maybe many of us) would dismiss as rabble rousing. Only communists, anarchists or worse promote such antics. It is dangerous stuff.

But this is a recurring theme of the writer of Luke. To him the Gospel *is* radical. Much of his gospel puts forward the idea that the coming of the Kingdom of God will mean a reversal of how things stand---a reversal that comprehensively benefits the poor and the marginalized and sees the arrogant, the power seeking, the greedy, the uncompassionate shoved aside and the rich deprived of their wealth and influence. And this is not some pie in the sky fantasy to happen only in heaven. No this is going to happen in the real world we live in---to be fulfilled right here.

Careful examination of the New Testament shows that the coming of the Kingdom of God ranked high in the teaching and practice of Jesus. And Jesus' teaching and way of being emphasized that this kingdom belonged to those least likely to enjoy power and privilege in the world. Those who belong are the poor, the children, women (who at that time occupied a lowly position in society), fishermen, peasants, the diseased, the blind, the blatant sinners, the demon possessed and anyone else on the fringes of society.

So why was Jesus so concerned about the disadvantaged and the powerless? Throughout his childhood and young adulthood Jesus lived in the very, very poor village of Nazareth. He would have been only too familiar with peasant antipathy to Roman rule and the aristocratic Jewish collaborators who exploited and oppressed with lethal force. There is little doubt that Jesus sided with the peasants and his clear concern for the poor, the oppressed and the disadvantaged was forged here.

It is therefore not surprising that Jesus, in his words and actions, often displayed a harder edge towards those he saw as exploiting others. His actions turning over the tables of those ripping off others in the temple are an example. He was also quite happy to fly in the face of then current social and religious strictures and regularly shared meals with the lowly-born and disadvantaged and closely associated with people who were regarded as socially unacceptable e.g. women and those regarded as unclean--lepers and the mentally ill.

For Jesus the barrier free reign of God as he experienced it, was already breaking into the world. He seemed to have a distinctive take on the question of its immediacy—the kingdom is coming but it is already here, it is among us and it is within us. But at the same time it is also still coming—Jesus taught his disciples to pray, as do we, “your kingdom come”.

Thus the suggestion that those who are the poor and despised are the chosen ones of God and conversely that the rich and advantaged may be sent empty away cannot be taken lightly. It raises a lot of questions about where we ourselves may stand, as a goodly proportion of us in this country *are* rich, advantaged and privileged. So there are many challenges for us when we come to think about this concept of the kingdom of God. Are we actually in it?

When I think about how Christianity has evolved over the centuries it seems to me that much of the thrust of Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom has been sidelined. Interest in the kingdom of God as a core theme has given way to a greater focus on individual salvation through personal faith and a strict adherence to piety, social conventions and morals. To me, this is a much paler and softer version of Jesus’ teaching.

And what this has meant is that there only ever a limited number of Christians who can clearly be seen to be standing against the power elites and the purveyors of violence, war and terror or speaking up against the incredible disparities and inequities between rich and poor countries. Those who do are quickly derided or silenced, as was Jesus. It is a risky business to speak prophetically, to attempt to make the powerful and the privileged accountable.

So announcing the kingdom and trying to live out what that means can be personally very challenging. We Christians have always been generous, energised and committed over the centuries in physically caring for the disadvantaged, raising money for the less well off in other countries and ministering to those who are ill and disabled.

But when it comes to confronting the power structures that are actually the cause of many of these ills, the power structures that maintain the gross distortions and inequities we see here and throughout the world, it is a very different story. It takes a lot of gumption to work towards the sorts of reversals that Mary talks about in her song and is going to mean that we may incur the wrath of our fellow citizens or those in power for daring to even ask, is there a better way?

What I believe is required is a sustained effort to practice the confronting kind of faith Jesus seems to have found and to live with the courage, wisdom, love and acceptance he seems to have embodied. That way we like Mary, can announce that the kingdom of God is here and within and our hopes, our prayers and our actions will stamp us as being of that kingdom.

In this time of peace and goodwill Mary draws attention to a more challenging edge of the Gospel that we comfortable Australian Christians might prefer to put aside. Food for thought with your Christmas dinner.

Note: An important reference for some of the thoughts in this sermon was the book *Jesus Then and Jesus Now* by Gregory C. Jenks (Brisbane Anglican Priest and biblical scholar).