

Week Two: Jesus proclaims the gospel manifesto

1. In reading from Isaiah, what is Jesus doing and saying that is so radical?

Luke's account of what went on in the synagogue in Nazareth is an exceptionally vivid part of the Gospel. It is fascinating to watch how the mood of the people changes as the story develops. To begin with their reaction to Jesus' comment is to be 'amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth'. The phrase 'gracious words' could equally be translated as 'words of grace'. Luke probably wants us to understand both meanings. They were words demonstrating God's grace – but also making it clear just how gracious and generous God's intentions were – not restricted to those who considered themselves in a special relationship with God. Jesus gives examples that begin to horrify and then anger his audience. Words of grace which when first spoken in the Book of Isaiah had probably been directed at God's people suffering in exile, promising them the 'good news' of liberation, but were now being given a new slant as Jesus used them to remind the congregation in the synagogue – and us – that God's grace gets into some surprising nooks and crannies.

2. Jesus claims divine authority. What other influences govern our lives and attitudes? Consider the influence of television, newspapers, the internet, advertising, favourite authors, friends, family, and so on.

I am writing these notes in the week that the turmoil in the money markets, particularly in Britain and the US, has reached fever pitch. President Bush is trying to push through Congress the proposals of his Treasury Secretary. And the two Archbishops in England, Rowan Williams and John Sentamu, have been speaking out about the underlying ethical issues. Archbishop Williams said: "Marx long ago observed the way in which unbridled capitalism became a kind of mythology, ascribing reality, power and agency to things that had no life in themselves; he was right about that, if about little else. And ascribing independent reality to what you have in fact made yourself is a perfect definition of what the Jewish and Christian Scriptures call idolatry." It is interesting to wonder where the world will be in Lent next year. How will we have dealt with the destructive power and authority that we have hitherto given to money? It is a particularly apposite question to ask in relation to this specific biblical passage, because Isaiah's words about 'release' echoes vocabulary used in the Hebrew Bible to speak about release from debt.

3. Marciallou was focused on the rights of his wider community. What needs are you aware of in your local community? How is your church responding?

It is both a privilege and a disadvantage to live in a country such as Britain where it is not dangerous to be a Christian. Unlike the situation of Marciallou in the Philippines – or indeed in

some parts of the world where Christians are a minority – in the United Kingdom we do not normally risk life and limb when we seek to spread the implications of the Gospel into the wider community in which we live. We may suffer the indignity of being considered slightly ‘odd’ in an increasingly secular society – but not generally much more than that. Perhaps though that is our difficulty! The challenge for all Christians today is to be able to speak the gospel appropriately and sensitively into their context, yet also allow the power of the gospel to challenge and seek to transform that context. We often need to pray for wisdom to know when to ‘console’ our community and when to ‘challenge’ it.

**4. The scope of Jesus’ manifesto is huge, with both local and global implications.
How can we play our small part in putting this gospel into practice today?**

There is a well-known quote from David Bosch who wrote, about 20 years ago, *Transforming Mission* that has since become the ‘classic textbook’ on modern mission thinking. Bosch defines mission as... ‘[Mission] is the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus, the good news of God’s love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world’. That is an excellent summary that locates the task of the church – and ourselves – within the overall mission of God. Our task as Christians is to seek to follow the guidelines set by Jesus himself and ‘participate’ in unfolding his vision for our world. We seek to use Jesus as our touchstone for what needs to be done – and we need to tell other people that! But more than that – as members of the Christian Church we seek to ‘incarnate’ Jesus in the here and now – effectively to ‘be’ Jesus for our world in our day. And we have a responsibility not only to share this manifesto of Jesus, but also to make clear the central role of Jesus himself in the story.