

Hear the Spirit: Transformation (Luke 4:19)

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Distinguished guests and friends in Christ, it is a privilege to bring the study from God's word this morning and to express, as I begin, warmest greetings from the land down under – Australia.

As a nation, Australia has a special tie to the theme of this Congress. In the early 1600s the Portuguese explorer, Pedro Fernandez de Quiros, declared our nation and region to be: “the Great South Land of the Holy Spirit”^[1]. I wish I could report that we had done a wonderful job in the last four hundred years; that our whole nation was a vibrant example of the kingdom, that our people feared God and that our text this morning – a call to jubilee – was being lived out all over Australia with exemplary passion. But, I cannot. Alas, ours is a nation like most nations. We have much work to do.

But for just a moment imagine with me if Pedro's words were today's truth. Imagine if there was a place on earth (any where really) where God's Spirit breathed righteousness and truth into every word, every action and every decision. Imagine if there was a place where people feared God more than they loved things and they cared for others more than themselves. A place where every citizen confronted injustice and no one was ever complicit with the deep wrongs in our world. Instead of worrying about their possessions and building bigger barns the citizens of this place would share until no one had a need. Just imagine!

Pedro proclaimed Australia “the great south land of the Holy Spirit” – but as a nation we did not hear it or heed it. Was it just a silly dream? Misguided thinking? When Pedro returned to Madrid in 1607 many regarded him as a “crank”, a crazy man, and perhaps he was. Charges of poor leadership and suspected mutiny are in the record against him. But what of his vision – was that nonsense too? Is it only the dreamers who dare say to the nations, God rules here! Is there any hope of transformation?

This brings us to our text and we approach it with a prayer: *“Oh God, give us ears to hear the Spirit!”*

THE VISION: A Jubilee People

We have just one verse this morning which, in its robust Judaic context makes a jaw dropping claim. Jesus was anointed by God, says the text, “to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour”! (Luke 4:19) So, what is “the year of the Lord's favour”? We can note a few things – theologically, historically and practically.

Theologically it is a big hope-filled idea. The phrase describes a time, acceptable to God, when his salvation will be fully experienced and everything transformed. It is the time when God puts it all right for all eternity! It is the moment that every prisoner, every blind woman, every bound man, every

broken-hearted child, every starving family eagerly awaits. It is the ultimate exodus from sin and the final return from exile. It is something to dance about, to write songs and blow horns for, and to shout from the house tops. Theologically, it's a big beautiful idea!

In some ways the text anticipates Pedro Fernandez de Quiros. Jesus (like Pedro) simply declares the arrival of God's Kingdom. He does not argue the matter but asserts it with mysterious authority. With this inaugural sermon he puts his prophetic stake in the ground. From this point on everything he says and everything he does seems like a trumpet declaring: "the year of the Lord's favour has come!" God's rule is here, and he is about to put everything right.

The challenge with this proclamation – God's Kingdom has come! – is how it makes us feel as we wait. Sometimes I feel like a relative at the airport. I stand waiting for my loved ones to appear at the gate. The doors keep opening and people come through, but not the ones I am waiting for. I feel like this sometimes when I stand in the pulpit and boldly preach: "God's Kingdom has come!" It is like saying: "Oh yes, the plane has landed – I heard the announcement. Jesus the pilot came through those doors and told us so himself! Then he went back into the customs office and we can't see him anymore, but it's coming, his Kingdom is coming!" Whether you are at the airport or in the pulpit you can start to feel the same thing – tired of waiting, anxious and even uncertain. But there is a word from God this morning for every preacher: "Preach on!" There is a word for every worker in the harvest fields of God's kingdom: "The year of the Lord's favour has arrived in Jesus. Wait, wait for the Lord!"

Historically it was a grand vision of periodic social reform. In Luke four Jesus is reading his bible. He quotes Isaiah (chapter 61) who was in turn referring to the book of Leviticus chapter 25. Here the Hebrew people learned about God's social reform vision – the year of jubilee. The plan was simple: every seven years have a Sabbath Year and rest the fields. Then after every seventh Sabbath year, blow the trumpet and have a jubilee year! This fiftieth year will be awesome. The people of God will live out the hope of the Kingdom in very practical ways.

The jubilee year would involve three courageous commitments from everyone: (1) leaving the soil to lay fallow, (2) forgiving debts and (3) liberating slaves. These things are revolutionary. Could you imagine the economic and political challenge of such a program? And could you imagine the consequences? Why, it would be like a new earth and a new heaven! It would be like a new Tokyo or a new Mumbai or a new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven.

Someone has calculated that AD 26 would have been the year for a jubilee. If Jesus was born in AD 4 (as many suppose) and if his ministry began at age 30 (Luke 3:23) his inaugural year in public ministry was the calendar year for a jubilee. Jesus was, on this view, a prophet with a deeply exciting agenda calling Israel to social and political reform.

Most scholars agree that Israel never did practice jubilee as a literal program of social reconstruction. So, is Jesus calling his follows to something radical when he announces the arrival of "the year of the Lord's favour"? *Theologically* it is a big and beautiful idea, a vision of God's righteous rule! But *historically* jubilee has never been implemented so what is Jesus saying *practically*? Does jubilee have continuing importance? Yes, I think it does.

Practically it is a call to radical discipleship. Nicholas Thomas Wright (an Anglican scholar) argues that Jesus wanted his disciples to live the jubilee model in their gathered life whether the rest of Israel was willing to do it or not. They would become the new Israel, the new hope, the new Adams and Eves.^[2] And here I think is the real power of the jubilee proclamation for you and me. Am I willing to live this Luke four sermon of Jesus? Are the Christians who form a church together with me in

Australia willing to be such a people? Are all of us – Baptists of the world, together with our fellow Christians from many Churches around the globe – ready to live lives that say, the year of the Lord's favour has indeed come? Against politics and social norms that look so embedded and unchangeable, are we ready to practice a new way of life in new communities of hope? Are we ready to be jubilee people?

The courageous commitments of jubilee – (1) not planting the fields, (2) forgiving debts and (3) liberating slaves – can be seen to have impacted the ministry and teaching of Jesus and the life of the early church. Jesus has inaugurated jubilee communities. These commitments may seem like distant ideals at first glance, but the principles are remarkably contemporary. They still define radical discipleship in the twenty-first century. Let's consider each commitment briefly. **[3]**

(1) Resting the Land. It is not hard to imagine a farmer's worries. "If we don't plant, we don't harvest. And if we don't harvest, we don't have provisions. And if we don't have provisions, will we survive?" God says: "Yes!" It will be the season of divine favour. Remember God's provision in the wilderness? God cared for Israel providing enough manna every Friday to feed them through Sabbath until Sunday when he rained down manna again. The jubilee year will be the same. God will provide.

Consider Jesus' promise to you: "Do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well." (Luke 12:29-31, Compare Lev. 25:20-21) The God of the jubilee will sustain his jubilee people.

Most of us are not farmers and we will not plant a field this year. But, many of us will go to work next week and we will be tempted to think that our livelihood depends on our job security and the next promotion. Well, it isn't true. What would happen if you reduced your income to take up God's call to mission? Do you trust God that much? What would happen if you took leave (without pay?) to serve as a short term missionary? The jubilee principle says that God would take care of you. Do you and I dare believe it?

So if we are going to be jubilee people we will need to trust God, not our capacity to earn or work or be self sufficient. Jubilee people experience the Lord's favour, because they position themselves to need it!

(2) Forgiving Debts. Jesus' model prayer (Luke 11:1-4), can be read as a jubilee prayer. "Give us each day our daily bread", alludes again to resting the land. And the phrase, "forgive us our debts, as we forgive everyone who is indebted to us", speaks broadly of sin but specifically of financial debt. On this reading the prayer is a celebration of God's forgiveness and a promise of jubilee attitudes among the followers of Jesus.

Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt 18:23-35) tells us how *not* to live. The master forgave a large debt and then, almost immediately, the forgiven servant refused to wave a small debt. His selfish actions were judged very harshly. No one who possesses a miserable-minded attitude like that selfish servant can be a true follower of Jesus.

And then there is the opposite, the positive example of Barnabas. He was a man who loved God, the church, and those in need. He sold personal property so he could put money at the Apostles disposal to meet the needs of others. And he was not the only one according to Acts 4:34 (also 2:45). Leviticus 25 speaks of redistributing the land in the year of jubilee to achieve justice.

If we are going to be jubilee people we will need to be generous. We will consider others before we consider ourselves and yield our resources to the work of God's kingdom. We won't build bigger barns for our extra "stuff", we will build a new world!

(3) Liberating Slaves. The long shadow of Roman rule which fell across Jesus' home land of Palestine had enormous financial and social consequences. Many peasants were systematically reduced to poverty, then insolvency and at last slavery. Unable to meet the demands of taxation they were ground into objects of servitude, cogs in the machine.

Some in Israel positioned themselves to reap benefits from this dysfunction. People like Matthew and Zacchaeus became tax collectors and as such they could become very wealthy while others became indebted to them. When they meet Jesus, the changes in their lives model what jubilee means for people like us.

Jesus visited Zacchaeus and changed his whole perspective. Zacchaeus paid back what he should not have taken, and then he gave half his wealth to address need. Effectively he was a first century Bono establishing the Jericho "Make Poverty History" foundation in the name of Jesus.

Jubilee people confront the system. They take practical steps to address their complicity in the wrongs of society. They use fair-trade products, stand up against poverty, confront injustice with their own resources and seek to obey when Jesus confronts them. Jubilee people lift rocks to see what is underneath – even if they would rather not know that there are more slaves alive today than in Wilberforce's day and that the cheap clothes and tech gear came from a sweatshop with forced child labour. Jubilee people don't get everything right, but they don't bury their heads in the sand either. They listen to hear the spirit and then they act!

So there is our pattern: (1) A people who trust God to provide for us (not our fields); (2) who are ridiculously generous and share so that none in our community are in need (debts are paid); and (3) who refuse to be part of the system that crushes the weak but instead strive to liberate the oppressed. This is who Jubilee People are.

The vision is wonderful. It always has been. Deep, profound and lasting transformation! But can we make it happen? Is jubilee real? Who dares blow the trumpet?

THE POWER: A Risen Saviour

The most significant thing here is not the vision, it is the vision caster! Not only is he the most faithful jubilee person who ever lived, but when Jesus dies and rises again he proves himself to be the one who has the power to make jubilee possible. He is its Lord and King. When he says "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" he puts himself at the centre of the jubilee vision as its author and finisher.

Many people have some kind of jubilee aspiration. Whether Christians or non-Christians they have a deep desire to make the world a better place. The followers of Jesus can join them in many different ways. We can share resources, ideas, advocacy and passion. But there is something distinct about our commitment as jubilee people; it is the prominence of Jesus. We know him to be the centre of everything and that is why we call him Lord! Without him there is no Kingdom of God, just a long empty wait.

We are so convinced of this that no other name will do and no other leader will suffice. He is our alpha and omega, our first and last.

- It is his grace that changes people from the inside out,
- It is his call to repentance and offer of forgiveness that redefines life,
- It is his example that inspires,
- It is his strength that enables,
- It is his presence that builds confidence and courage in jubilee people,
- It is his gift of the Holy Spirit that bends the rules of the universe filling faithful followers with power,
- It is his resurrection that makes decay and death like temporary interruptions in serious jubilee work,
- It is his name that brings the power brokers and conspirators of the present age to their knees,
- It is Jesus Christ who makes jubilee possible!

If you would be a jubilee person, if you would hear the sermon in Luke four and obey it, then see the preacher in Luke four and follow him! Jesus, our risen Saviour, is the power of jubilee.

Bruce's Story

I have a friend, Bruce. He is a former policeman and a retired pastor who spends two days each week in the inner city of Melbourne witnessing on the streets. He understands the *vision* and the *power* of Jesus' sermon in Luke chapter four and he lives it.

Street witnessing is not easy work, Bruce has to trust God in every conversation and he does more than just talk. He brings people along to "*Dinner Tonite*" – the weekly meal at our church for the hungry and lonely. He connects people with our care ministries. He organises counseling, food parcels and occasional loans of money for those with challenges. He folds people into small groups and leads bible studies with inquirers. He advocates for the needy and confronts injustice. In short he is a jubilee person.

Bruce is a good man doing good work, but what makes his ministry truly significant is the power of our risen Saviour working through him. Recently he had a remarkable – somewhat comical – spiritual confrontation in Swanston Street in Melbourne. It reminded all of us that God is marvelously and mysteriously in charge. It is his jubilee and the name of Jesus will prevail.

Bruce fell into conversation with a Hare Krishna devotee who declared: "all religions are the same". Bruce disagreed challenging him with the claims of Jesus. After a short exchange his conversation partner, wanting to end the discussion, pronounced the words "Hare Krishna" upon Bruce as if to invoke an Eastern blessing. Not wanting this to be the last word Bruce spoke the name "Jesus Christ" over him. The other man said again: "Hare Krishna" and Bruce said: "Jesus Christ". This exchange continued amid the throng of people for what seemed to Bruce like an eternity – an old grey-headed Aussie grappling nose to nose with a partly-shaven pig-tailed young Hare Krishna. It was a laughable sight but a serious confrontation. Bruce thought to himself: "What have we started, I can't let him win. I wonder how long this will continue". He began to pray along the lines of Acts 4:12 acknowledging "there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved". The Hare Krishna kept chanting his mantra while trying to pass out literature and Bruce kept praying the name of Jesus maintaining the position of his nose about two feet directly in front of his saffron-robed friend and mirroring his every movement. Calls for support from a circle of waiting, watching, laughing Hare Krishna friends proved fruitless.

Bruce asked God for help and suddenly the phrase "the blood of the Lamb" (Rev 21:11) popped into his head. He prayed aloud, "Lord, by the blood of Jesus Christ, bind Satan and release this man into a personal relationship with you". To everyone's astonishment the Hare Krishna immediately spoke the name, "Jesus Christ". He was momentarily flabbergasted by the words of his own mouth and so was

Bruce. He stopped chanting, and with genuine curiosity asked, 'Why don't Christians chant the name of Jesus in the streets like we chant Hare Krishna?' Bruce replied with true Christian compassion "my concern is that you would know the love of Jesus and experience his power". It is not the syllables of his name but the gift of his grace and the power of his resurrection that drives our mission. Having handed out the last of his cards, the Hare Krishna fled calling out with a weakened voice, "Hare Krishna". Bruce responded one last time "Jesus Christ". And it was the last word!

The story is a small reminder of a huge truth. Jesus is Lord! Let it be known that his name is above all names. Let it be known that his Kingdom has come. Let it be known that we, his people, have seen the jubilee arriving, we are working to advance it and waiting to celebrate its full and final completion. We have a **vision** to be a jubilee people – trusting God fully, living generously and challenging injustice everywhere. And we have the **power** of Jesus, our risen Saviour – power to confront the darkness of this world, power to prevail, power to be faithful, power to live the vision of jubilee and change the world.

Blow the trumpet, sound the horns; the year of the Lord's favour is here!

[1] While the English phrase which is popularly attributed to Quiros is in fact conflated by a misquotation of Captain James Cook, the vision of dedicating the newly explored regions to the Holy Spirit belongs to Quiros.

[2] N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), p 294-5.

[3] See: John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), p 60-75.

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