

Sermon in person on Sunday 23 January 2022

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: 1 Corinthians 12. 12-26 & Luke 4. 14-21

With

Now in it's 17th season, this year's *The Apprentice* is the usual mix of inflated egos and inept delusion. Over those 17 years, candidates have provided us with some of TV's most entertaining and cringe-worthy quotes. Among my personal favourites are:

"My first word wasn't mummy, it was money."

"I think outside the box. If I was an apple pie, the apples inside me would be oranges"

And, who can forget the classic; *"I'm not a one-trick pony, I'm not a 10-trick pony. I've got a whole field of ponies waiting to literally run towards this job."*

Rewind a few thousand years and we find Jesus surrounded by his apprentices, standing up in his hometown synagogue and making a claim about himself that would embarrass even one of Lord Sugar's wannabes. Having read from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus announces 'Today, that prophecy is fulfilled'; in other words, 'It's me; Isaiah is talking about yours truly!'

Now, if someone today were to do the same in this church, I'm guessing we would be skeptical to say the least. It's no surprise then that those listening to Jesus thought, 'Who the hell does this

upstart rabbi think he is?'. A home crowd is usually a tough crowd, and the good folk of Nazareth are understandably suspicious of this carpenter's son claiming he's the actual Messiah. Later, in fact, they got so furious they drove him out of town and even attempted to throw him off a cliff!

These words that Jesus quoted were a ready-made mission statement for this new movement, this new age that he was initiating. It's sometimes referred to as the Nazareth Manifesto and it promises good things to four groups of people in particular.

The first is good news for the poor; both the actual poor and the spiritually poor.

Then there's freedom for the prisoners, echoing the Old Testament principle of Jubilee or Year of God's Favour, where debts are cancelled, slaves freed, the land rested and family property restored.

There's recovery of sight for the blind; a problematic phrase sometimes for those who are visually impaired, but which can also be understood in terms of spiritual blindness.

And last but not least, freedom for those oppressed by corruption, injustice, phobia...

If you were to write your own mission statement; the 'insert your name here' manifesto; what would it be? In other words, what are you living for?

A few years ago, Sam Wells, the vicar of St Martins-in-the-Field, published a book entitled '*The Nazareth Manifesto*'. Here, he talks about the importance of being '*with*' others, as opposed to doing '*for*'. He argues that at the heart of the Christian faith is God's commitment to be '*with*', revealed most powerfully in Christ, who while he spent a week in Jerusalem at the end of his life working '*for*' us, and three years in and around Galilee working with us, he spent 30 years in that hometown of Nazareth just being '*with*' us. For Wells, the gospel can be summed up in three words; God *With* Us.



Jesus' manifesto is one of compassion. In Latin, the word compassion means '*to suffer with*'. The researcher Brené Brown defines compassion as, '*the daily practice of recognising and accepting our shared humanity so that we treat ourselves and others with loving kindness, and we take action in the face of suffering*'. Treating ourselves and others with loving kindness because we recognise and accept our shared humanity. Compassion is a relationship between equals and it's not just a

feeling, it's a doing, while at the same time resisting the temptation to fix or solve.

Brené Brown elaborates; 'Compassion is fuelled by understanding and accepting that we're all made of strength and struggle – no one is immune to pain and suffering. Compassion is not a practice of 'better than' or 'I can fix you' – it's a practice based in the beauty and pain of shared humanity'.

She says the near enemy of compassion is pity; 'poor you'. Empathy on the other hand, the most powerful tool of compassion, demands that we be present to someone's pain without any judgement. Brown again says, 'We need to dispel the myth that empathy is "walking in someone else's shoes". Rather than walking in your shoes, I need to listen to the story you tell about what it's like in your shoes and believe you even when it doesn't match my experience.'

Boundaries, of course, are an essential part of healthy compassion and empathy. The writer Prentis Hemphill describes boundaries as, 'The distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously'.

Often, I hear people downplay their suffering because there are so many other people so much worse off. Hurt, however, is hurt. And sometimes the hardest thing is to admit that, to be vulnerable, to say 'I'm struggling'. Vulnerability is not a sign of weakness, it's the greatest sign of courage.

Sometimes we hear about compassion fatigue and that assumes, I think, that there's only so much compassion to go around.

Compassion and empathy, however, aren't a pizza with only so many slices to share. The wonderful truth is that when we practice compassion and empathy, it grows exponentially.

How easy do you find it to receive the compassion of others? How easy do you find it to be compassionate to yourself?

Being *with* is the nature of the God who is Immanuel; 'God *with* us' in our poverty, our prisons, our blindness, our oppression.

Jesus' crazy claim that these words of the prophet were talking about him are made crazier by the truth that these words are also talking about us. We, too, are called to sit *with* and stand *with* family, friend, neighbour and every fellow human within the strength and struggle of this both beautiful and painful life.

Luke 4

14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. **15** He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

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

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."^[f]

20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. **21** He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

1 Corinthians 12

12 Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. **13** For we were all baptized by^[c] one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. **14** Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

15 Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. **16** And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. **17** If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? **18** But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. **19** If they were all one part, where would the body be? **20** As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

21 The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" **22** On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, **23** and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, **24** while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, **25** so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. **26** If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.