**Homily Epiphany 3 26th January 2025**

The annual week of prayer for Christian unity finished yesterday but the work of prayer for unity and the work spreading the Good news of God’s kingdom of grace mercy and love will last for as long as there are those who have not heard it, or until the end of time, whichever is the shortest probably.
In the week ahead tomorrow is Holocaust memorial day when we recall over 6 million Jews, and Roma people and gay people killed in Europe – 80 years since the liberation of the concentration and death camp at Auschwitz and the need for love, mercy, grace and peacemaking is as strong as ever

There is a lot going on in our scripture readings today, but we will focus on the continuation of the Epiphany themes of revelation, showing and the widening manifestation of Jesus and his mission, to the whole world.
Today in our gospel reading we see Jesus himself as an adult introduce his mission to the world as he reads the scroll of the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth and then sit down and explain it.
Just think, this story of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth and the account of Ezra and Nehemiah reading the Law to the people, in our first reading , might be the beginning of our Christian tradition of reading the scriptures and preaching about them as part of our worship.
In Jesus’s day obviously the Temple in Jerusalem was still standing and that was the focus of Jewish prayer, sacrifice and worship. But synagogues had possibly developed in some form much earlier, possibly during the Babylonian exile, when the Jews could not go to the Temple, or at another time possibly in places too far away to travel easily to Jerusalem.
It developed first as a local meeting place, where people could gather, and read or more likely recite the scriptures and discuss them together.
It was also a good place for teaching by great visiting teachers and rabbis and Jesus following his baptism and affirmation by God, and his time of testing and reflection in the wilderness, was joining that tradition. Having been baptised , affirmed by God, and tested in the wilderness. he is full of the Spirit, and ready to begin his ministry, so he had, it seems, ,whilst making his way back to Nazareth, been building up quite a reputation as a teacher in the other synagogues he had visited on the journey.

In Nazareth Jesus attends the synagogue as usual for him, having grown up there he would been known as a regular , and there would been great interest in him as a local boy with a growing reputation. Perhaps it was a bit like David Bowie and his links with Bromley. We have no way of knowing what might or might not have been planned ahead of his visit , Luke doesn’t tell us that, but expectations might well have been very high.

He stands up to read, possibly unusual for the times because he can read, as many could not, and much scripture would have been shared orally. But He is handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, he unrolls the scroll and finds the passage, possibly he even chose it .
The message that Luke seems to be giving us, so far, is the one in which Jesus is in control of this visit, and of what happens there and indeed the passage he reads begins
“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” unsurprising given his recent baptism and his wilderness experience, Jesus must be overflowing with the energy of God for his mission in his life going forward, and it continues with this outline from Isaiah of his mission and by extension of our prophetic mission too as Christians following in his way, he says

“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.’

God anoints prophets to speak for and to act for him in different ways on behalf of those in many difficulties, but here especially those who are kept down and limited by poverty, imprisoned by lack of resources or by lack of vision, and those oppressed by injustice. It is a very challenging agenda for renewal, transformation and change,
Then when we understand ,that for His hearers in the synagogue, the year of the Lords favour references the year of jubilee described in Leviticus, it becomes even more exciting and challenging for his hearers, because it means this, - every 50th year the Bible tells us slaves should all be freed, debts be forgiven, land sold under pressure should be returned, and liberty proclaimed throughout the land. It is a promise of pure joy, rest, restoration, liberation and redemption

Then Jesus says, even more exciting ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

Our reading today ends here, at this point of great excitement, but the story is not finished so just in case we don’t get to hear it next week we will follow it forward, as we are one Sunday short in Epiphany this year.
(Cont.)
“All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’

He said to them, ‘Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, “Doctor, cure yourself!” And you will say, “Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.”
And he said, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town.
But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.
There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.’
When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.” (end)

All who heard this message responded initially in the same way, with wonder and with admiration or amazement. Just like the shepherds at Christmas who were amazed by the message of the angels at his birth in Bethlehem. It really is the only possible response to the good news of God at work in the world through Jesus.

We can almost hear the synagogue buzzing with the voices of those saying, “ what amazing news. Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” Definitely it sounds as if they were having those ‘Local boy made good conversations’
But it doesn’t last ,something goes wrong, universal amazement and wonder become universal rage against Jesus, something changed.

Maybe expectations were just too high and the people expected too much from Jesus, maybe they were indeed looking for proof that he was able to heal as he had at Capernaum.
But it was Jesus who turned them down. and the mood turned ugly when he said, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town.

Maybe they felt he was presumptuous claiming to be a prophet, maybe they wanted to own him, keep him as their own miracle worker and to keep him with them in Nazareth, or maybe they did not want a prophet at all, after all prophets were historically uncomfortable and not always popular

The last sounds reasonable especially as is quite likely, if Jesus has the prophetic gift for reading hearts and minds, and understanding crowds, and the very common human needs of the people, he needed to make sure that they saw and understood that his message was universal, for all people.

We don’t know and can only speculate.
We can though ask some questions of ourselves; what do we expect from Jesus’s ministry ? Do we want the privilege and entitlement of his ministry for ourselves and for our church first or alone ?
Or, do we share with Jesus his concern for the marginalized and vulnerable and for all those beyond the boundaries of our local congregation?
Our answers to those kinds of questions affect not just our individual ministry but our ministry as a church community
The effect of Jesus leaving the synagogue and going on his way, safely in the end, has the effect of spreading not only his message further and wider but also of stretching our own ideas of ministry to include the whole world.

so we pray:
God of all mercy,

your Son proclaimed good news to the poor,

release to the captives,

and freedom to the oppressed:

anoint us with your Holy Spirit

and set all your people free

to praise you in Christ our Lord. **Amen**