

Today we are going to look at a really, really fascinating passage of Scripture in which Jesus says something **so provocative & vexing** to his audience that they become enraged – so enraged that they try to kill him. And we are going to look at this message & why it made everyone there so angry that they wanted to throw Jesus off a cliff. This passage contains **a message that is so important** that – I believe - had Christians really got hold of it over the last 2000 years it would have changed the course of world history – it would have **saved lives, prevented abuse, saved untold numbers of deaths by ethnic cleansing & genocide**, and would have perhaps even have **prevented two world wars**.

Two of the most recent and most horrific examples of genocide have occurred in many of our own lifetimes, both of them within **the past 30 years**, the first of those was the horrific ethnic cleansing that occurred in **Europe, in Bosnia-Herzegovina** when **100,000** people were slaughtered between **1992 & 1995**, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> was the shocking genocide in **Rwanda, Africa**, in **1994**, when in the space of **100 days** an estimated **800,000** Rwandans were murdered, as the major ethnic group, the Hutus, began to slaughter the minority Tutsi. But from the point of view of the Gospel, one of **the most shameful** things about both these horrors is that they were perpetuated by people who claimed to be Christians.

Prior to the genocide, **Rwanda** had previously been regarded as **a Christian success story in Africa**, with around **95%** of the population claiming to be Christian. But belonging to churches & believing the Bible did nothing to stop those people from participating in the slaughter that broke out in 1994. Indeed, once the genocide had finished **many priests, ministers & pastors** were imprisoned for having actively participated in the murder & in the war crimes. And lest we try & dismiss that by saying *“things like that happen in Africa, it's so tribal there”* – we look & we see that the **Bosnia-Herzegovinan** slaughter two years earlier took place in **the middle of Europe**, and the main perpetrators of war-crimes there were the **Serbs**, in a nation that was, like Rwanda, **95% Christian**. The people carrying the guns & committing the slaughter totally regarded themselves as Christians. **How could this be?**

And how about **WW1**, that mad slaughter in which **16 million people died** in the middle of Europe as **two Christian Empires**, two deeply religious Christian Empires, went at each other's throats?

Now before I go too far staring into **the darkness** of what has happened when **those who claim to be Christian don't actually follow the teachings of Jesus**, let's get down and examine what God is saying in this passage from **Luke 4**. Let's let the Scriptures speak to us.

First of all remember where we've been & what we covered last week. **Last week** we looked at Jesus' baptism, how he was then transported from the waters of the Jordan to the burning sands of the Judean desert, to be **tempted & tested** by the devil, & as part of that testing was taken to Jerusalem & its temple, the **seat of Israel's military, economic & religious power**, & there the devil offered him '*all the kingdoms of the world with their splendour, wealth & power*' – with one small provision – if only Jesus would bow down & worship him. And of course, Jesus refuses, choosing the way of **the Messiah who suffers for others** rather than rather than taking the way of worldly power & force.

And last week we also talked about '**spiritual warfare**', and how Paul says in **2 Cor 10:4** that

*<sup>4</sup> The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world – they are not guns or bombs or fists, or shouting & screaming, but spiritual weapons that have the power to demolish evil.*

Now sometime **after all this tempting & testing** in the desert, the Scripture here tells us that **Jesus returns to Galilee** in the power of the Holy Spirit, and in Galilee he has been stirring up the people with his teachings & his healings, & his reputation has been spreading like **wild-fire**. And then he returns to his **home town of Nazareth**, the town he grew up in, enters the Synagogue on the sabbath, and takes the scroll of the prophet Isaiah that is handed to him to read.

Now in the gospels, this is Jesus' **first public sermon** of any length. So if you like, this is Jesus nailing his colours to the flag pole, this is Jesus outlining why he has come, this is Jesus issuing **his mission statement and his mandate**. He finds the place where it is written, & reads

“The Spirit of the Lord *is* upon Me,  
Because He has anointed Me  
To preach the gospel to *the* poor;  
He has sent Me to heal the broken hearted,  
To proclaim liberty to *the* captives  
And recovery of sight to *the* blind,  
To bring freedom to those who are oppressed;  
<sup>19</sup> To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

Here Jesus is making it clear **who he has especially come for**, and where the **heart of the gospel lies**. The gospel, the good news is especially for the poor and for those who all their lives have heard **bad news**. The gospel is for the **imprisoned and the oppressed**, whether that be imprisoned **physically** (like those in prison), **spiritually** (like those needing deliverance), **culturally** (like the despised Samaritans), **socially** (like the hated tax collectors) or **economically** (like the poor) – and to these & to all people, the gospel brings **freedom, brings hope and brings salvation**. And for all people, rich & poor, the gospel opens our eyes so that **we can see truth & discern darkness from light** – “*I once was blind, but now I see*” – is the cry of every person who truly encounters Jesus. Suddenly, we see the world in a new way.

Now at this stage everybody in the Synagogue is **loving it**, & they are **hanging on Jesus’ every word**. Every eye is fastened on him, and all speak well of him & his **beautiful, poetic words**. I mean - this is a **local-boy made good**, this is one of their own who is doing great things all over the country-side. And if he has been bringing blessing & good news to all those ‘other people’ out in the districts – what’s he going to do here in his home town where his own relatives live? Surely he is going to **make Nazareth prosperous**, and bless them even more than he’s been blessing all those other people. Surely he is going to make Nazareth great again!

But then **the tone begins to change**. They haven’t actually understood what Jesus was trying to say through that quotation from Isaiah – **that God’s love is continually reaching out to the people on the edges, the margins**, to the people who are the most broken, the most vulnerable, the most poor, the most oppressed, the most blind, to the outsiders, to the people the insiders regard as

the furthest from God's blessing. **Like the tax collectors, like the prostitutes, like the Samaritans.**

And just so they really do get it, Jesus now launches into two stories from the Old Testament:

The first about the prophet **Elijah** taking the blessing & provision of God well outside Israel's borders, to go & save the life of a poor widow living in Zarephath. There are all kinds of **echoes of Jesus in this action of Elijah's** – for example three chapters later in **Luke 7**, Jesus raises back to life the only son of a widow, just as Elijah raises the widow's son in Zarephath way back in 1 Kings 17.

**And the offensive thing** was not that Elijah reached out to save a poor widow, but that he by-passed all the more deserving widows who were **true Israelites**, and took God's blessing far away to a **gentile** woman who lived in a **pagan** nation of **Baal worshippers**, in a place that on today's maps would be in **Lebanon**.

The second story is like it, and involves the prophet **Elisha** being sent to heal a man named Naaman from his leprosy, **by-passing all those pure blooded Hebrews** in the nation of Israel to do so. And for those people in that synagogue, **this story is even worse** than the one before. Not only is Naaman a despised foreigner and a pagan, a worshipper of idols, he's a military **officer in the Syrian army**, a nation that Israel had often been at war with throughout its history. And again **Elisha's ministry foreshadows Jesus'**, and again if we jump forward three chapters to Luke 7 we find Jesus ministering to a foreign military commander, **a centurion** in the hated Roman army that was occupying Israel, whose throat many Jews would happily have cut.

And by now **the mood in that Synagogue has really, really changed**. Ten minutes ago they were delighted with how well their home-town boy could speak, but now that **what he is actually saying** is sinking in, and they are angry. **More than angry**. They are 'filled with rage'. And they drive Jesus out of the Synagogue and towards the edge of a cliff with the intention of killing him, but somehow, & it doesn't say how, except we know it isn't his time yet – Jesus is able to walk back through them & on his way.

**Why – why are they so furious & so enraged?** (Pause) I think it's because they wanted Jesus to confirm that they were **God's favourites**, & that all other nations, **pagan nations**, should be subject to them.

There are few beliefs in the world **harder to confront & shift than 'nationalism'** – the belief that somehow my people, my nation – **are better & more deserving** than others, and other people somehow less deserving. And in my experience, **there are few issues people get more angry about** when you challenge them, than this one. Jesus here is directly taking on & confronting the **Jewish nationalism** of his own people, and telling them that **God loves every human being equally**, whether they be Jew or Arab, & whether they be from Syria, Lebanon, or Samaria.

And we know this from the beginning of the Scriptures

**Genesis 1:27** tells us that *every human being, male & female, is equally made in God's image, regardless of where we're born, the colour of our skin, or even what religion we practice*. How different human history would be if we'd taken this one verse to heart. If only they had believed it, because then **the Christian crusaders** (*& any rugby team with that name should have 10 points taken off the at the start of every game*) would never have rampaged across Europe & into the Middle-East, over & over, slaughtering every Jew & Muslim they came across & setting in motion a fear & a hatred towards Christians that still plagues us today.

And with the coming of Jesus an even more incredible dynamic has been started. Let's read **Ephesians 2:14-19**

<sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups (Gentiles & Jews) into one, and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, <sup>15</sup> by setting aside in his body the law with its commands and regulations. **His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity** out of the two, thus making **peace**, <sup>16</sup> and in one body to **reconcile** both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. <sup>17</sup> He came and preached **peace** to you who were far away and **peace** to those who were near. <sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

**19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people** and members of his household.

**Do you see that?!** *We are now all one new humanity*, one new people, fellow citizens of God's Kingdom. **We are no longer first & foremost NZ citizens or Australian citizens or American citizens** – we are citizens of the Kingdom of God. **In the coming of Jesus**, in his death & resurrection, **the dividing wall of nationalism & racism has been destroyed**, abolished, and put to death in Jesus' own body on the cross. And the significance of that is that any time we act out of nationalism or racism, we are rejecting what Jesus did on the cross.

**Colossians 1:12-13** reinforces this idea that **through Jesus our citizenship, spiritually, has been transferred** out of the world, & into the Kingdom of God. It says

*the Father has qualified us to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.* <sup>13</sup> *For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness **and transferred us** (RSV & NASB) **into the kingdom of the Son** he loves,*

We are kingdom people now – that is our new identity, that is who we are!

**For me**, if there was ever a **clash between those two citizenships, or a clash between the laws & values of my nation & God's kingdom**, I know which one I'd have to choose to obey.

**Imagine** what would have happened if all the **Christians in Germany**, when ordered to war by Hitler, & ordered to kill Jewish people, had simply said '*no – because we belong to a higher Kingdom & a higher law & a higher authority than you*'. **Imagine if all the Serbs** who claimed to be Christians had refused to obey their orders because they belonged to higher Kingdom? **Imagine if in the lead up to WW1, all those Christians** in Europe had said, "*no, I will not go & kill my brother or my sister, I will not do it*". History would have been changed. And without WW1 there would have been no WW2.

**WW1** was between **two Christian Empires**. You know that the **first Christmas** of that war thousands of troops from both sides climbed out of their trenches to celebrate Christmas together, & had to be ordered to stop & go back

to shooting one another by their Generals? **And four years later 16 million people lay dead.**

**The gospel** that Jesus has given us is a gospel of **forgiveness**, a gospel of **reconciliation**, a gospel **that makes peace** in the midst of war – both the wars in our hearts & the wars in our nations. **And our God is a missionary God** – who sends prophets like **Jonah to despised foreigners**, so that they might know good news. Our God is a missionary God, who would **put on flesh & blood and leave the comfort of heaven** to come & dwell among us, experiencing our pain and our suffering, so that we might know **we are loved**. **Our God is a missionary God, and in Jesus he reached out to the most poor, the most despised, the most lost, and told them that the Kingdom of God was theirs if they wanted it.** Our God is a missionary God, **and through Jesus he tells us to go to the ends of the earth if necessary**, from the gutter-most to the utter-most as a friend of mine used to say, so that the lost, the lonely & the broken would know that there is a God who loves them.

**Can you imagine what kind of world this could be**, would be, if Jesus' mandate & mission **was our mandate & mission** too?

Can you imagine the impact we all could have on our world, if we were **anointed with that same Spirit Jesus was anointed with** – that Spirit that reaches out past every ethnic and racial and social and economic barrier – and sees all people as made in His image, and deeply loved because of that fact & because he died for them?

Luke 4:18-19 was Jesus' mandate & mission statement - & it needs to become ours too, written on our hearts – propelling us out into the world armed with no other weapons but grace & love.

“The Spirit of the Lord *is* upon Me,  
Because He has anointed Me  
To preach the gospel to *the* poor;  
He has sent Me to heal the broken hearted,  
To proclaim liberty to *the* captives  
And recovery of sight to *the* blind,

To bring freedom to those who are oppressed;  
19 To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.”

**Let's pray together - & ask God to show us how we can take up this mandate.** Who is it in our world, in our city, in our neighbourhoods, in our circles – who is poor, is broken, is captive, is oppressed – that God is calling us to reach out to with his love & his healing & his good news?

Let's pray.

Before the benediction: so often we don't get the chance to talk & dialogue about messages like this – & this was a provocative message about a provocative piece of Scripture – so I'm really happy to chat with you about it over coffee, & please, feel free to disagree with me as well – we want this to be place where people can think for themselves & we can dialogue together. And take that chance with each other as well , over coffee now, or later in the week, or in your small group