

Self denial 2014  
 Good news to the poor  
 Luke 4:18-19

Self-Denials theme this year is Your Kingdom Come and the message for today is Good news to the poor!

The poor have always responded best to Jesus. They were often the first believers of His message. The poor tend to sense their needs more keenly than the comfortable, in every way. Material deprivation lends itself to spiritual sensitivity and responsiveness, if we want to be more spiritually responsive, live simpler and give more money way.

Jesus' good news to the poor wasn't a promise of plenty, as some churches are tempted to preach, nor is it some cure-all, but it is a statement of solidarity, of compassion and grace. Jesus spoke to people who knew the depths they had sunk to in their need and offered them hope. They are told that they aren't write offs, they aren't rejects – God loves them. He recognises their honesty and offers forgiveness freely. For people who have nothing, there is nothing to earn, to attain, to trade; it is a gift they can simply embrace. This, as you can imagine, is good news.

Listen to this video of a women called Kundula who came from a very poor area in India.

The passage we look at today has been called Jesus' mission statement. We find it in the first message He preached in Nazareth, we looked at this same passage last week on Pentecost Sunday, It is recorded in Luke 4 but Jesus was reading from Isaiah

**Luke 4:18-19**

<sup>18</sup> "The Spirit of the LORD is upon me,  
 for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor.  
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 that the blind will see,  
 that the oppressed will be set free,  
<sup>19</sup> and that the time of the LORD's favour has come."

Commentators suggest that the year Jesus began His public ministry was the Year of Jubilee, a year of celebration and liberation when all debts were cancelled, all slaves set free. If this was the case, Jesus' message would be

especially fitting, for He was about to set people free from religious domination as well.

For many that would have been good news! When Jesus read from the Book of Isaiah the prophecy concerning Himself, there were 613 commandments which the Pharisees had determined were embedded in the Scriptures.

I have talked previously about some of the rules based around the commandment to keep the Sabbath. When Gay and I were in Israel we noticed that each of the hotels we stay in had a Sabbath lift, I wasn't sure what that meant, maybe that the lift was the only one that worked on the sabbath so that amount of work was kept to a minimum. But no, I discovered that on the sabbath the lift just went up and down automatically, stopping at every floor and therefore not requiring anyone to push a button, which would be considered work.

While I am not sure there would have been too many elevators in Jesus day, those who heard Jesus' words would have been struggling under a heavy burden of what they were told was true religion and holiness. For some, their ears would have pricked up and initially marvelled at the good and gracious words Jesus spoke to them.

But as He continued speaking to them, for some their marvel turned to wrath. 'How dare He tell us we are wrong?' they asked. 'We know Him. He grew up here. This is just Joseph's boy. Who is he to claim that he is the messiah'

Maybe they had sons who they thought were much better candidates to be the Messiah than Joseph's boy. After all, they wore phylacteries – does anyone know what a phylactery is? — boxes worn on the forehead or around their wrists which contained verses from the Torah, the first 5 books of the bible. Jesus, evidently, never did (Matthew 23:5).

I must confess in my earlier years being impressed the size of people bibles and especially the ones with the gold edge, what godly people they must be. Or those who go to this meeting and that seminar and use certain spiritual words. Maybe I am a closet Pharisee. I'm impressed with outward signs of spirituality.

Jesus, however, models something entirely different. As they watched Him grow up, the people in His hometown didn't say of Him, 'Now there's a spiritual young man.' No, they wanted to kill Him (Luke 4:29).

Not only did Jesus not carry a Bible, but there is no record of him ever giving a formal Bible study to His disciples. We Christians can sometimes spend too much time in formal bible study (yes I did say that out loud). Hiding away from the real world in a holy ghetto studying the bible. That's what the Pharisees did too. Endlessly. They unrolled the scrolls. They had discussions. They prodded and pontificated. But although Jesus knew the Word possibly better than all of them, His approach to spiritual life and Bible study was entirely different.

And because Jesus was able to move about without a big Bible in hand, impressing people with His knowledge, He was able to do incarnational ministry which was completely non-intimidating —He knew the bible and it's message so well that He could derive a compact little lesson on spiritual life simply from seeing a man casting seed into a field (Luke 8:5).

When Thomas was doubting, Jesus didn't say, 'Let Me give you five reasons why the Resurrection is true, and fifteen Old Testament prophecies which shed light on what is happening before you.' No, He simply said, 'Here touch this!' (John 20:27).

It's not that He didn't know the scriptures, he obviously studied them. But it's as though He had condensed them to the point where the people He cared about could be effectively reached without being intimidated by His knowledge. His was an incarnational ministry which amazes and challenges me.

Not only do we find an absence of recorded Bible study in the Word, but (now I am going to get myself into more trouble) there is not one recorded instance in the New Testament where Jesus called a pray meeting with His disciples, not one recorded instance when He gathered the lads around a fire and said, 'Let's spend some time in prayer.'

Finally, after a year and a half of hanging out with Jesus, His disciples said, 'Lord teach us to pray'. They said 'John prays. The Pharisees pray.' Indeed the Pharisees did pray - in the parking lot, on the street corner, in the marketplace, they loved to give long prayers.

But what did Jesus do? In response to His disciples' request to teach them to pray, He repeated the simple prayer He had taught them a year and a half earlier in the Sermon on the Mount.

Oh it's not that Jesus didn't pray and it's not that we shouldn't pray together. Jesus' disciples knew prayer was the foundation of His ministry. Seeing Him slip away before the break of day morning by morning, they knew He was a man of passionate prayer. And yet He didn't necessarily pray with them. Even in the Garden of Gethsemane, He said, 'You stay here while I go and pray,' (Matthew 26:36).

Why? I suggest it was because, although prayer is a privilege, it can also be very intimidating to people. Corporate prayer is great and I want to encourage it because it encourages all of us, but I know for a lot of people, public prayer is hard. Evidently, Jesus was so kind, so gracious, so loving that He would not put that kind of trip on anyone.

I do enjoy praying with other people, but generally I prefer to pray on my own. In Jesus day it was all about public prayer and Jesus reversed the entire order. I wonder if today where public prayer is so limited he might have something else to say? Jesus talked about a prayer closet, about praying in secret, as if to say, 'Forget the outward expression because it intimidates people. They're burdened by your apparent spirituality, but I came to set them free.' **That is good news!**

Christians in public can so often come across as prim, proper, righteous, out of touch. The Pharisees did too. The best-dressed men of their day, they came across as very polished and sophisticated. But they also came across as stern and unapproachable.

Not Jesus. Jesus was very approachable. Who would have thought that His opening miracle would be making wine for a wedding party. Tradition tells us that in Jesus' day, when a girl was born into the family, her father would each year make a batch of wine for himself and one for his daughter's marriage celebration. Therefore, if the bride at Cana was fifteen or sixteen, there would have been presented to the happy couple 16 years' worth of wine. But we are told that after drinking all 16 years' worth, the wedding party in Cana ran out of wine.

So what did Jesus do? Did He give them a lecture on the dangers of overindulgence? Did He only make a bottle or two of appetise? No, He made about 600 litres of the best wine. If I were Jesus, I think I would have kicked off my public ministry with a nice healing miracle, or maybe an attention grabber of bringing someone back from the dead.

Instead, Jesus said, 'Here's a little bride and groom who are embarrassed. I want to help them.' He gave no teaching; He got no glory. He simply provided wine with no strings attached. In fact, when studying His miracles, very rarely do we see Jesus make a request of the people He touched or healed or helped. With only a couple of exceptions, no teaching given, no tract was given out.

'Sell your goods and follow Me,' He said to the rich young ruler,' (Matthew 19:21). But when he couldn't do this, Jesus didn't say, 'Let's get together for coffee and rethink your decision. I want to take you through Ecclesiastes and explain to you the emptiness of riches.' No, He simply let His invitation stand.

I am occasionally challenged by passionate, zealous Christians, they are intense, single-minded, totally committed. Yet I also observe that the fire in their eyes, and the determination on their faces can sometimes cause people to be intimidated, to back away, to feel bad. Not Jesus. Why? He trusted the Father, that in due time the rich young ruler would see the truth of His words, see the depth of His love and come back. There's never any panic or frenzy seen in Jesus. Rather, He moved with serenity, certainty, tranquillity.

As a result, although He was referred to as a glutton, a drunkard, and the friend of sinners, no one ever accused Him of being too busy. WE read in the beginning of the Gospel of Mark that Jesus' ministry had taken off and after a day in Capernaum of healing and miracles the whole town was outside the house he was staying in, and we read...

### **Mark 1:35-39**

*<sup>35</sup> Before daybreak the next morning, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray. <sup>36</sup> Later Simon and the others went out to find him. <sup>37</sup> When they found him, they said, "Everyone is looking for you."*

*<sup>38</sup> But Jesus replied, "We must go on to other towns as well, and I will preach to them, too. That is why I came." <sup>39</sup> So he travelled throughout the region of Galilee, preaching in the synagogues and casting out demons.*

Jesus cared about one thing: His Father's will – to bring Good News to the poor

That's all. That is how He was able to move around with serenity, focus, and a

complete lack of busyness. 'My burden is easy and My load is light,' He said (Matthew 11:30). And that was good news to many - that should be good news to us.

Jesus truly breaks the mould of what we perceive holiness and spirituality to be. Although we think this is seen in the fact that He hung around publicans and sinners, I believe it is seen more clearly in the fact that He also dined with Pharisees. Sure, He spoke harshly to the Pharisees because He knew that's what it would take to get through to them. But when they invited Him to their gatherings, He went.

You see, at the home of Simon, Jesus ministered to the Pharisee and prostitute alike (Luke 7:36-39). Both are poor, yes in different ways, but both are poor. Both need hear and experience the good news .

Pharisee, prostitute, woman, man, old, young, black, white — He loved anyone and everyone the Father sent His way. That is good news.

Jesus said

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Jesus blows apart every idea most of us have about spirituality and ministry. As you consider your spirituality and ministry I encourage you to Revisit Jesus — this laid-back Lover of people whose intensity was private and personal, who didn't put pressure on people, yet impacted people in such a way that it transformed their life.

Re-acquaint yourself with the Friend of sinners, the Man Who spoke gracious words continually, Who healed unconditionally, Who loved sacrificially — for although He is unrecognized by most religious people, He alone defines true holiness. Jesus is good news for the poor – that includes both people on the street in India and in nice homes in NZ.