

Address by Rev Martha McInnes
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This week we have seen a living parable of Luke's reading. Watching the story unfold in Washington DC, hearing the words of a bishop pleading for mercy, watching the stony faces of those in power, reading the messages of abuse that followed, we, I think, see the story from Luke unfolding in 2025.

Okay, Luke's story is set in Nazareth, "where Jesus had been brought up." Nazareth is a backwater instead of a seat of power. It is the place where Jesus is among people who know him well. Luke also says four times that this story takes place in the synagogue--a centre of Jewish religious and political identity. So on that sabbath day, Jesus went to the synagogue "as was his custom." He took the scroll of Isaiah 61, read it out loud, and then sat down, saying that he himself — this ordinary hometown carpenter, was the embodiment of Isaiah's messianic promise to bring God's good news to the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed." We might see this as something like John's promise of the word made flesh in Luke's version. Jesus is the embodiment and fulfilment of the word in Isaiah--'today this is fulfilled in your hearing'.

Everyone was amazed and astonished--at first that sounds good. How wonderful that this hometown boy has made good--but we see in a few verses, outside this reading, that the crowds turn against him. How in the world could he say such a thing?! They are outraged--what a nasty person and not very clever either. But Jesus was living the truth of God's word. What should have brought joy became uncomfortable for people to hear.

In his book, *What Jesus Meant*, the historian Garry Wills says that "What Jesus signified is always more challenging than we expect, more outrageous, more egregious." Jesus read the lines from Isaiah and stated that this mission would be embodied in his ministry. That is not what people expected. They expected the hometown boy to focus on them and their needs, not on those often overlooked and ignored. Jesus' words were a challenge rather than a comfort and point us to the ways his life continues to challenge us.

Sound familiar? Though there is no religious centre in the US, the National Cathedral in Washington DC is often a place where political leaders gather, such as the funeral of Jimmy Carter a few days before this. Bishop Budde knows Trump, for she was in her seat when he was last president. We all know enough to know what is coming. Those who were returning to some of the most powerful roles on the planet sit stony faced as they are confronted with a call for mercy. The words of Jesus do not sit well with them when embodied by a human conduit of God's word. Bishop Budde is now being cited as a hero and a villain. In the reaction to her words, I see our second reading. Paul says that each individual who is a follower of Jesus, not matter how weak or strong, is important for the body. We have to care about, listen to, and support all the parts of the body. And yet, we hear religious leaders saying the Bishop was wrong to address Trump in the way she did. But her response to critics is to say perhaps we can offer respect and listen to each other. She has listened to Paul and is valuing all parts of the body. the church as a body is like a quilt or a jigsaw—lots of pieces fitting together. No piece is exactly alike but each piece is needed to make the whole.

So I wonder what this story means for us. We can see it out there, but it is more than a story from Luke and words from Paul. It is more than parables in the 21st century. It's a guide for followers of Jesus.

How does our church embody Luke's words? There is a cultural message that growth is the way to succeed. We hear this in politics, we hear it in church life. Is that the message we hear from Jesus? I don't think growth of any kind is his focus. Instead, his words point us to a way of living--a way that focuses on listening and valuing and equity. I think Jesus asks us to examine where we are caring for those who are imprisoned, hunger, cold, wandering through life in pain and isolation? We can see faithfulness to Jesus' way when someone wanders into our building on a Sunday in search of food. We see it in the care offered to people who sleep in the garden or our friendship with people who use the building. However, beyond that I think we see it in what we do with our lives away from this place--in the respect and care embodied in how we live our lives, in our work, in our relationships, in our volunteer activities.

And these words of Jesus challenge us to look at those again. Some might ask us how our part of the body of Christ is growing? Instead, I think we need to ask 'do we value some folks who aren't like us, do we make space to hear the voices which are less loud, from those with less power?' In our traditions, we think this is a value we embody with church meetings where all our voices can be heard. Rather than ticking the box that says 'yes, we do this', I think we need to really ask whether our church life values all people and makes space for all voices. It is easy for the church to mirror society, to give power in a hierarchical manner to focus on those with societal power. We have all heard those voices from within the church attacking Bishop Budde, saying her request for mercy, a challenge to listen to the voices of the frightened and powerless, was not biblical. I think her challenge mirrors Paul's image of the body--we should value everyone and listen to those who may not have a voice outside our community.

The words of Paul and Jesus point us to our calling. Friends, Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of the world-- 'follow me'.