

# Sunday 24 January: Third Sunday of Epiphany

## Jam Today

**Readings: 1 Corinthians 12.12-31a; Luke 4.14-21**

As I was reading another of those interminable stories on the economy the other day, I was reminded of one of my favourite passages from *Alice in Wonderland*, where the White Queen has decided that she would like to hire Alice as a lady's maid:

*'I'm sure I'll take you with pleasure!' the Queen said. 'Twopence a week, and jam every other day.'*  
*Alice couldn't help laughing, as she said, 'I don't want you to hire ME - and I don't care for jam.'*  
*'It's very good jam,' said the Queen.*  
*'Well, I don't want any TO-DAY, at any rate.'*  
*'You couldn't have it if you DID want it,' the Queen said. 'The rule is, jam to-morrow and jam yesterday - but never jam to-day.'*  
*'It MUST come sometimes to "jam to-day,"' Alice objected.*  
*'No, it can't,' said the Queen. 'It's jam every OTHER day: to-day isn't any OTHER day, you know.'*  
*'I don't understand you,' said Alice. 'It's dreadfully confusing!'*

Well, that pretty much summed up my views on the economy. But then, as I was thinking about this sermon, I realized it also probably summed up many people's views on Christianity: dreadfully confusing, and with a strong emphasis on jam yesterday, and jam tomorrow, but never, ever, jam today. As a church we seem to spend equal amounts of time obsessed with the past or worrying about the future; looking back to the glories of yesterday, and preaching the rewards of tomorrow. But rarely, rarely, do we actually seem to focus on today, and the promise that it might hold.

But today is actually quite important. Because it's where we are. And it's actually the only place we ever can be. There's one of those "quotes on the tube" down on the Bakerloo line just here at Charing Cross from Goethe, who said that "Nothing is worth more than this day." Nothing is worth more than today. And it's that word, that idea – "today" – that is the key to our Gospel reading, and perhaps to a lot more than that.

This reading comes from the very start of Jesus' public ministry. He's been baptised, tempted in the Wilderness, and now returns to his home town to preach. And the text he chooses is from Isaiah. A text written towards the end of the Jewish exile in Babylon 600 years before. A text which described what God would do for the returning exiles. And a text that would have resonated with Jesus' contemporaries looking for the end of Roman oppression. It's a text in other words, which could very easily be seen to be talking about the yesterday of Babylonian exile, and the tomorrow of a restored Israel, but not about the present, the now, of the synagogue in Nazareth one Sabbath in about 30 AD. But Jesus changes all that by saying when he sits down to preach: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All of a sudden this passage is not about yesterday or tomorrow, it is about today.

So what is it that has been fulfilled? The passage talks about good news to the poor; release for the captives; recovery of sight to the blind; letting the oppressed go free; and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour. Obviously, in one sense, these were physical acts that Jesus did perform. He did bring good news to the poor; he did restore sight to the blind. But the

passage means much more than that to both Isaiah and to Jesus. The poor are not just the economically poor, but all those on the margins of society. The blind are not just those whose eyes cannot see, but those who have inward blindness, who live in darkness. The captives and the oppressed are not just those in jail, or those under the Roman heel, but also those trapped in the prison of sin, or oppressed by their doubts, by their sorrows, or by their distance from God. And what is proclaimed is the year of the Lord's favour. The jubilee, the time in Leviticus when the slaves are set free, property is restored, debts are cancelled. Everything is reset and starts anew. So what is promised by Isaiah, and, thus, by Jesus, is both physically and figuratively, release, restoration, return from exile.

But what does Jesus actually mean when he says this has been fulfilled – and in their hearing? Well I think the key is in this idea of jubilee, in the year of the Lord's favour. The year when release begins, when restoration occurs, when relationships are reset. This hasn't been fulfilled in the sense of fully achieved – there are still the poor, there are still the blind, the oppressed. It has, however, been fulfilled in the sense everything is now in place for these promises to be made into reality. The incarnation of Jesus, the coming of the Son of God to earth, inaugurates a new era, inaugurates this year of the Lord's favour. So what Jesus is saying to the Nazareth congregation is this: you no longer have to worry about when in the future the old prophecies will be fulfilled, because they are being fulfilled right now, starting today.

So that was then, but what does this passage mean for us – in our today? Well there is, particularly at St Martin's, obviously a very literal application. In the church which pioneered social care, which inspired Amnesty International, which has fought racial and sexual prejudice, in this church bringing good news to the poor and marginalised, seeking to help the captive and the oppressed is a present, physical reality. And in carrying out Isaiah's and Our Lord's words we contribute to the building of the Kingdom here on earth today. But there is also the other aspect of the Isaiah's words: the good news to those of us who feel marginalised even if not economically poor; the good news to those of us who sense our spiritual darkness, a blindness of the heart, an inability to see God anywhere; the good news to those of us who are held captive by our sin, or oppressed by our own fear, or our own anger, or our own prejudices. Alienated from God and humanity by barriers which keep us out, and chains which hold us down. And that's the present promise. That today, in this the year of the Lord's favour, we can begin the process of our own release, our own restoration, our own return from exile, back into relationship with our fellow humans and with our loving God.

Let me return to the Alice in Wonderland quote. It turns out that underneath the nonsense of the White Queen's dialogue, Lewis Carroll was playing a word game. In Latin, there are two different words for the English word "now". One is "nunc" – as in Nunc Dimittis – which is used only with the present tense. The other is iam, sometimes written j-a-m, which is used with past and future tenses – yesterday and tomorrow, in other words – but never with the present tense, never for today. So what we learn from *Alice* is that the word "now" is different in the past and the future, than it is in the present. But what Jesus did that day in Nazareth, what he still does, is to draw the "now" of yesterday, and the "now" of tomorrow, together in the "now" of today. The past and the future meet as they only can, and as they always do, in the present. We spend so much time looking forward, or looking back, that we often miss the promise of today. But what Jesus tells us on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January 2010, as he told that congregation 2000 years ago, is that freedom, release, sight, wholeness, restoration, return from exile are all now available because today – because of the incarnation of Jesus Christ – today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Amen