

## Sermon Archive 530

Sunday 6 April, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Luke 4: 16-21

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



In the times of ancient Israel, if you were doing an apprenticeship, then it was quite normal for you to work for an expert tradesperson for no payment. Your payment was in fact the knowledge that you were acquiring, the growth in your skills from which later on you could make money. It was a kind of work now, get paid later model. People bought into that model, and in the main it worked justly and well.

Another way you could end up working for nothing was servicing a loan. If you suffered a financial hit and needed a big cash injection, you could borrow money from someone, whom then you would pay off slowly. I guess it's a bit like a mortgage, although sometimes it was more like a loan from a loan shark. Some borrowers got caught up in some awful situations and had their time of indentured service extended, extended and extended - to the point that they might have felt like they'd never be free from the debt. Until the debt was paid, the lenders had the power to sell the loan to anyone else they chose. The borrowers had no say in the matter. So they could end up having a debt to someone whom they would never have chosen.

A third way of working for nothing was more like bankruptcy - not a chosen loan, but a forced surrendering. People forced into this kind of indentured work had no choice in the matter. They weren't weighing up whether to raise a loan or not. They were basically sold to pay off their debts. This situation was not common; but again, it was not unheard of. Israel had its class of unpaid workers.

Purportedly part of the religious law mediated by God to Moses, certainly contained in the long-gestating First Testament book of Leviticus, then referred to in Chapter 61 of the book of the prophet Isaiah, then read in the Nazareth synagogue by Jesus, was the idea of the "Year of the Lord's favour". The idea was that every seventh day was a Sabbath - a day of

rest. Every seventh year was a Sabbatical year - a day of significant rest. Every seventh Sabbath year was a Jubilee year, a year of the Lord's favour. In acknowledgement of super-significant Jubilee rest, the fields were to lie fallow. People were to return to the lands of their ancestors, and debts were to be forgiven. It was like a great re-set for the nation - a "going back to the start".

Debts were to be forgiven. Forgiven? Did this include the debts owed by indentured workers to their loan sharks? Indeed, the religious experts said that it **did**. And so, I guess that if you're equating "protracted compulsion to work for no payment" as slavery, then the Year of the Lord's favour was a smashing of the structures of slavery.

Time for some boring maths. If the Year of the Lord's favour was part of the order established by Moses, and happened every fifty years until the time of Jesus, then Israel would have had (round about) 28 opportunities to celebrate it. Scholars note, however, that the Year of the Lord's favour had never really caught on. When it **was** observed, it was observed mainly in a ceremonial way (with the blowing of the trumpet and a few family reunions), But with hardly any of the hard bits included. Ploughing the land was just too tempting. Wiping debts was able to find a place under the carpet - Mean let's be practical! And a **big** thing was interpreting the clause about returning to your ancestral land. If that meant giving up your rights to occupy your current land (**that** kind of national re-set), then . . well, how complicated, don't we know, is the return of land to its previous owners.

Interestingly, modern Israel does not observe the Jubilee. The argument is that when modern Israel was established, the land was given entirely to the new government. Since then, the land (all the land) is the property of the government. So any Jubilee land restoration responsibility would involve the government giving the land to the government. Jubilee now makes no sense - or if it makes sense, it's a sense that's entirely academic (with no practical force in day to day life. It's a clever reconciling of radical religious commandment finding harmony with status quo.

Anyway; in the synagogue in his old home town, watched by the crowd, Jesus picks up the scroll, and reads from it. It contains some famous words from the book of the prophet Isaiah. It has Isaiah saying that the

Spirit of God is upon him, prompting him to declare the Year of the Lord's favour. Jesus declares that the scripture has found fulfilment today. In something of a manifesto moment, Jesus declares the coming of God's Jubilee. Does he mean to say that his ministry is to be a great re-set for the people of Israel? Does he mean that his life among the people will be a liberation for the enslaved? Does he mean that he will enable a removal of debt that twenty-eight fifty-year efforts have failed to produce? Lofty ambitions, Jesus! Are you sure your sights are not a little too high? Just as well you're only announcing it in the backwater of Nazareth, and that your audience doesn't include millions of people from all around the world who wear your name and love your work!

What else do you say? Good news to the poor . . . Well the slaves are poor, I guess. But there **are** others - those whose land is low quality, or who have no land. Those who work in multiple jobs, but still don't have enough. Those whose children are not attending school anymore because they feel they need to do menial jobs to top up the kitty jar.

What else? Release to the captives . . . Do those in prison not deserve captivity. And surely our prisons don't hold those who are innocent! Do they? If **they're** going to be released, we're going to need enquiries, and courage from whistle-blowers - or confessions from those who really did the crime. We're going to need reforming of the police and the courts. We're going to need to ask questions about whether the over-representation of certain demographics doesn't indicate unconscious bias or social disadvantage. And don't get me started on those who are captive to addictive substances - huge captivity there. In this manifesto moment, are you really taking all **that** on?

And more? Recovery of sight to the blind . . . Yes, Fred Hollows' people taking eye surgery around the Pacific region and Asia, medical capacity being built in places devoid of infrastructure. But also that other kind of blindness - the blindness that when presented with a human being sees only my property, a slave. Are you saying that you will help us see one another dressed in a new dignity, a proper equality, a shared humanity - rather than in the clothes of commodification?

If that is your manifesto, dear Lord, then, were you to come into our city, even riding a donkey, we'd rush out to greet you, shouting "Hosanna,

save us Lord". But ah . . . we get ahead of ourselves. For now, give us grace to hear you taking the scriptures upon your life.

-ooOoo-

There we are. Throughout Lent, as we have explored various aspects of slavery and freedom, we have ended each sermon wondering whether Easter presents us with a vision in which we might have hope. Today, searching around the words which Jesus adopted at the start of his ministry to describe his vision for his ministry, we acknowledge that the concept of the Year of the Lord's favour has been, in the main, just an idea. A nice idea which never quite found a practical place within the culture of the people who received it. Vision is one thing; enacting the vision another!

Maybe today, part of what we need to consider is how Jesus managed to actualise his vision into the real stuff of his life. To what extent did he make things better for the poor people he met? (Well he celebrated the widow's mite, and he cleared the money-lender out of the temple.) To what extent did he manage to get people out of prison? (Well he didn't rescue his cousin John the Baptist, nor did he himself come down from the cross. But later Peter walked free from a prison.) To what extent did he make the blind to see? (Well, there was the famous incident with the man born blind - and all the controversy that swirled around it.). To what extent did he find freedom for the slaves? (Well, he inspired faith in Paul, who convinced Philemon to set Onesimus free.). Jesus, and the Jesus people who became his hands and feet, advanced the manifesto we've heard this morning.

And then there is Easter - that great freedom that from our Lenten perspective has yet to come. What power is in it? What vision?

One week closer to the culmination of Lent we come. And we keep a moment of quiet.