

Epiphany 3

In our lives, there are days which characterise, shape who we are; they form our identity. The day could be our wedding, birth of a child, or grand child, the starting of a job or a profession, a particular birthday, an illness, a death, perhaps even a divorce. These days set our path; and with a bit of hindsight, we can see they have formed us and sum up who we are. As a nation we have chosen yesterday as the day which characterises us – and I am not sure that is the right day, who we are or want to be as Australians. But for us personally, I think we can all think of a day or days – there could be several - that perhaps changed us, and marks out who we are.

For me 19 January stands out. Yes last Saturday week.

The 19th January was the date of my ordination in 1986 – 33 years ago. This was in Albury at St David's. I was ordained and inducted to ministry there. Last Sunday, on Jean and my return from Bundaberg to Melbourne, we attended St David's Albury. True not the 19th, but near enough. The subsequent significance of that day in 1986 all came flooding back. And then today, this is the anniversary of the first Sunday I preached as the Rev John Evans. And do you know what, we have just heard the same readings that were set for that day, all of those years ago.

Here I was: a relatively young man – 30ish; certainly younger than either of my children are today; I had come from another career, a lawyer, and was starting a new one, and it was effectively the first day of my ordained ministry. Yep - you have got it, wasn't this just like the situation with Jesus, as recorded in Luke 4. The former carpenter, aged about 30, begins his public ministry in his hometown synagogue.

I actually have a copy of that first sermon. I think I have improved: but I think you can see why that week, 33 years ago, has been a significant one as to who I am. And today I can add that this day, the 27th January, 2019 has further significance, in that for the first time in my ministry I have returned to a place where I have been before. A return, a second coming!?!

OK all of this interesting and important for John Evans, is there also a message here for this small congregation in this passage from Luke. It is afterall somewhat presumptuous to think that this day – the 27th January, 2019 and this passage might be significant for this congregation.

Well it could be.

For me the reading, with its quotation from Isaiah 61, gives a clear focus as to what ministry should be about and for that matter, what congregational life should be about.

Briefly:

1. It involves scripture. Here the old covenant – the prophet Isaiah – or for us we might say – not the literal word of the bible – but understanding and interpreting for today Christ the Living Word. I was after all ordained to be a minister of the word.
2. One must be open to the movement of the Spirit: the spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me; . . . and then come some specific tasks.
3. To bring good news to the poor – not to just make us all feel comfortable in our wealth and first world concerns.
4. To proclaim release to the captives – wider than say just stray refugee footballers in Thailand or journalists in China. Most of us in the west are captive to something – egos, wealth, screens, addictions, fear and so on.

5. Recovery of sight to the blind – yes literally the disabled, the sick and marginalised in our community; but how about, as the hymn says – the inwardly blind too?
6. Then there are the oppressed – let them go free. Refugees on Nauru or Manus. People with no home. Those who are struggling with climate change.
7. But there is hope – to proclaim a year of the Lord’s favour. Hope over fear. To break down walls and live a rich and diverse life – rather than build walls.

Somewhere amidst these seven points - I suggest there is the identity of this congregation - I am sure – and we will have a little chat about it soon; but there is one thing I have not mentioned, I believe was critical for Jesus – 2000 years ago, John Evans – 33 years ago; and possible for us now. Jesus simply rolled up the scripture – it was written on a scroll – and said: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Today. It is fulfilled. Today.

Not just yesterday – a long time ago; when Isaiah was around, or when this congregation was booming, or some time in the future after we appoint a committee, and do yet another study, then think about it, and have another series of meetings. No. Today. What struck me 33 years ago was also that ‘today’. My life would henceforth be different. From that day - today. Not everything was formed, or clear. It was work in process. But that day – meant something.

It is human nature to drift – it is also a characteristic of institutions, (indeed they are programmed to do it) to just drift. ‘Oh yeah – we know there is a problem, but it is going to be too hard to fix.’ Jesus however, said ‘today’. With him life and the possibilities for life were going to be different . . . now. Today. And as we know in the postscript to this story – the good folk of Nazareth didn’t like it and filled with rage drove Jesus not only out of the synagogue, but also out of the town and threatened to hurl him off the cliff. A great start we might say. Getting on with it – is often not popular; but at least they understood that Joseph’s son, was from now on going to be different. Today. In fact that day characterised his whole life; his ministry and that in the end he was hurled off a cliff. Crucified.

Now before we have a discussion about this passage – I want to refer to the Nehemiah passage. It is also very similar.

Israel had returned to Jerusalem after its Babylonian exile . It was now 80 years later - just a lifetime; and the place was just a shambles. The Temple was in ruins – and there was despondency and well – drift. West Hawthorn? I don’t know - but you have the picture.

The account tells how the people gathered together and told the priest Ezra to bring the book of the law, the Torah, the teaching of Moses. So he read for many hours and the people were attentive. There is then a detail to the passage about this which is interesting. When Ezra had read – Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah ‘helped people understand the law’. “So they read from the book , from the law of God, with interpretation. “They gave the sense so the people understood the reading.”

It would seem some individuals, perhaps just some ordinary folk - yes reading the scriptures, the law – with understanding. Explaining – no doubt with great integrity and based on their own experience – what the scriptures said; but it required this interpretation for people to understand. Hitting them over the head with just the Bible was not enough. The Scriptures needed interpretation. However, then comes the bit like in Nazareth all those years later. Nehemiah – the Governor gets up and says “**This day** is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.” In other

words: Today things will be different now. No more drifting; no more lack of understanding. Today – this day will be so different for you. This day marks who you will be.

Well for us – what does this all mean?

Discussion Starters

First, any general comments on the two readings.

What aspects of the Scripture Jesus quotes strike a chord for us; what is our identity.

Then is today any different to other days, even other days when we may have thought about these questions – or do you just want to throw the preacher over the cliff?

It seems to me that if we are in fact clear as to who we are and what our task together is: how can that be best achieved – starting today?