**23rd January 2022**

Come and join the body of Christ.
Come whether you feel weak or strong.
Come whether you are suffering or rejoicing.
Come whether you feel oppressed or free.
All are welcome here.
Side by side, hand in hand,
we all stand together in the body of Christ.



**A gathering prayer**

Just as we are, Lord, we gather in your presence.
Help us to be the body of Christ in this place;
to stand together with our neighbours;
to bring the good news to the poor;
to help set the oppressed free.
In your strength and in your name, we pray.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of approach**

Today, Lord God, we come before you as is our custom;
as was the custom of Jesus growing up in Nazareth.
We await your Word to us now, just like those who waited
while he spoke in the synagogue after his ministry had begun.
May we hear your call and stand with him and with one
another, to serve freely in the work you have given us.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of adoration**

God of heaven and earth, we kneel in adoration
before the mystery made manifest in your Son, Jesus,
who stood with us, as one of us.
So, we stand with one another in adoring you
by living the way of love and life he showed us,
setting us free to serve in the fullness of your grace.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

Lord, we confess that we tend to see our calling as individual.
‘What would you have me do?’ we ask. ‘Where might I be best
used?’ And, of course, that is part of our calling, for you see us
as individuals.
We are also called to stand alongside one another in our
service, and we sometimes forget this.
But you, Father, always see the bigger picture.
Forgive us for being so caught up in our own spheres that we
fail to see the need to stand with our brothers and sisters, to
serve together in the advancement of your kingdom.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Sometimes our vision is limited;
not so much tunnel vision as a warped way of seeing,
wrapped around ourselves and the world as we know it.
Our pictures of Jesus have been formed by rose-tinted paintings
– a man dressed in spotless white, blonde and blue-eyed.
Yet you forgive us our childish and short-sighted understanding, Lord.
Correct our vision, we pray, so that we may see the poor carpenter of Galilee,
Jesus the Jew.
Thank you for forgiving us when we think everybody is like us.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

We praise you for the freedom we take for granted, Lord –
the freedom to serve you every day of our lives,
openly and seldom challenged.
We give so little thought to this freedom
that we sometimes fail to exercise it.
So, we thank you, Lord,
for every opportunity that comes our way
to be your hands, your eyes, your heart in this world;
to do your will, to see things as you do, to share your love.
We praise you that in serving, we stand alongside
our sisters and brothers in Christ, in a ministry stretching down
the generations from Jesus himself.
All thanks and praise be to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
**Amen.**

**Focus Scripture: Luke 4:14–21; 1 Cor 12.12-31a**

Jesus unrolled the scroll and started to read ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
    because he has anointed me
    to proclaim good news to the poor.…

It was a small Gideon pocket New Testament that was the first Bible I read seriously. As a sixteen year old I wanted to read the Christian message for myself and I asked my Gran if I could borrow her Gideon Bible. Very clever those Gideons, they don’t give you the whole Bible to start reading – the old testament is strange and weird territory for most people – wonderful though! I would pour over John’s gospel to find out more about this Jesus character and what he did and said and whether it had any relevance to my life.

The Word of God spoke to me. Good news was announced to me - and brought me to faith.

When I was at University I was part of the Christian Union and we would try and share the good news about Jesus Christ with our fellow students. Sometimes we did this heavy handedly and looking back I sometimes cringe at some of our efforts.

But at least we tried.

One thing I was part of at university was sitting on a bookstall outside the Hall of residence dining hall giving away books about the Christian faith as students queued up for dinner. We got the expected abuse and very few took the literature. However, I had the special blessing and encouragement of meeting a guy three years later at a Christian Conference who came up to me and said he remembered me. ‘You were at Nottingham University and you used to sit on that bookstall. I wasn’t a Christian then – but taking a book from you that day changed my life. Eventually I got round to reading it and it made me think and eventually I came to faith.’

When you are plodding away in church life –you don’t always get that encouragement. You may know the Christian faith is good news, life changing news – but the rest of the world doesn’t seem interested. They have other more pressing interests and distractions. Or they think you are deluded or bigoted or just weird - whatever.

But hold onto the promise that our work for the Lord is never in vain.

It is vital that our lives speak of the good news we have received in Jesus Christ. St Francis of Assisi once said, ‘we should preach the good news of the gospel all day long – and if necessary, use words!

I have come across some Christians and some churches and I’m not sure they are good news and believe in good news.

It’s obvious that the kind of people we are and the way in which we live must back up our witness, but we cannot wait until we’re perfect to declare the gospel. We must make the message clear as best we can, given our limitations.

As important as it is to live a holy life as a witness to Christ, it is also essential that we do our best to proclaim the word of God in words, because people need to hear the story of salvation.

Martin Niemoller, a German Lutheran bishop, was called upon to negotiate with Hitler during World War II, in the attempt to save the Church of Germany from being closed down by the Nazi dictator.

Toward the end of his life, Niemoller told of a recurring dream that he had in which he saw Hitler standing before Jesus on Judgement day. Jesus got off his throne, put his arm around Hitler, and asked, Adolph! Why did you do the ugly, evil things you did? Why were you so cruel?’

Hitler, with his head bent low, simply answered, ‘because nobody ever told me how much You loved me.’

The bishop reported that at this point in the dream he would wake up in a cold sweat, remembering that during the many, many meetings he had with Hitler, he had never once said, ‘by the way Fuhrer, Jesus loves you! He loves you more than you’ll ever know. He loved you so much that He died for you. Do you know that?’

So often we fail to bear witness, and hence lose precious opportunities to alter the course of history.

But our opportunities for proclamation are few and far between and many would say it is insensitive and inappropriate in todays society. What is truth? How can you arrogantly proclaim you have the truth? There are many people claiming to have the truth? You need to earn the right to be listened to.

We do need humility and openness. We aint got all the truth. We are not God with absolute knowledge. But that doesn’t stop our word of testimony. Like the blind man in John 9 who was cornered by Pharisees trying to discredit Jesus he replied ‘whether he is a sinner or not I don’t know. One thing I do know I was blind but now I see!’ (John 9.25)

A guest preacher in a rather large church began, "There are three points to my sermon." Most people yawned at the point. They'd heard that many times before.  But he went on.
"My first point is this. At this time there are approximately two billion people starving to death in the world."  The reaction through the congregation was about the same, since they'd heard that sort of statement many times before, too. And then he said, "My second point."

Everybody sat up. Only 10 or 15 seconds had passed, and he was already on his second point? He paused, then said, "My second point is that most of you don't give a shit!"  He paused again as gasps and rumblings flowed across the congregation, and then said:

"And my third point is that the real tragedy among Christians today is that many of you are now more concerned that I said 'shit' than you are that I said two billion people are starving to death." Then he sat down.

The whole sermon took less than a minute, but it is in many ways one of the most powerful ones ever given. He was reminding them we are called not to mere piety but to genuine morality. We are called to action, not to fancy words.

Jesus preached a short sermon. But what a sermon! He clearly denotes the kind of ministry he came to pursue. It is to be a ministry to the poor and outcast, the blind and unaffirmed.

In the gospel reading we see a congregation gathered and attentive as the scriptures are read. Jesus observes Sabbath by going to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. He is asked to read something from scripture. He stands to read scripture and sits to speak, as was the custom of rabbis.

What did Jesus teach about God’s way to those in the Nazareth synagogue? This passage is only the first half of Jesus’ teaching there – the rest comes in next week’s passage.

Jesus begins his teaching by reading a passage from the prophet Isaiah. We do not know if this choice was his or was a designated reading for that Sabbath.

But he starts ‘the Spirit is upon me….’

There is an obvious connection that Jesus makes between his experience of baptism and the prompting of the Spirit, pressing him into the wilderness and then into a ministry of teaching and proclamation in Galilee.

Certainly, Jesus now consciously opts for the cause of the poor, imprisoned and oppressed, making this his priority out of all the options he could have chosen. Some call this his manifesto. This is what I’m about!

Jesus brings the good news of God – announce, release, recovery, setting free. How might Isaiah’s words shape our understanding and practice of mission? In what ways do our words and lives proclaim the good news of God’s ways?

* Announce, release, recovery, set free.

It is every now and again good to consider what we are about as a church. Church mission statements like company and business mission statements can often be treated with a dose of cynicism – they get put up on walls and at the top of headed notepaper and then completely ignored. Which is why they do need looking at every now and again to get your organisation thinking through once more, ‘what are you about?’

Before the pandemic hit we put together a Vision document for the next ten years: Vision 2030 and we revised our mission statement from

Called to be God’s People,

Transformed by the gospel

Making a difference in the world

To what it is now:

Inspired by Jesus, walking his way of radical love, to make a difference in this world.

Perhaps we need to compare both of them to **Luke**

**4:18–19**. Where are the points of connection between

the two?

Can we identify the programs in which our church is actively engaged which would fit into the works identified in these verses and Jesus’ teaching of God’s ways?

Announce, release, recovery, set free.

The “year of God’s favour” at the end of these words from Isaiah refers to Israel’s tradition of Jubilee. Leviticus 25 describes the elements of Jubilee. It was to be observed every fifty years. Jubilee called for the return of all lands to their original owners. It provided for the freedom of indentured servants.

There is no evidence that Israel ever fully kept a year of Jubilee. You can imagine getting to year 49 and the wealthy owners thinking mmm, next year we lose all this and go back to being equals with everyone else – must come up with a plan to scupper this idea. Yet it remained a promise and hope and a scripture – counted as God’s will.

Now, in Luke’s account, Jesus begins his public ministry by announcing after this reading from Isaiah: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Was Jubilee to come at last?

Well of course such a claim would upset those who owned the land at present and who were comfortable in the status quo. You can start to see that the manifesto of Jesus is not going to be universally welcomed. Next week we’ll see the reaction to Jesus and why this reading and his claim to fulfil it caused unrest in Nazareth and nearly cost Jesus his life.

The issue of immigration and asylum is a hot political topic throughout the Western world.

*Steve Taylor is joint-vicar of*[*St James, Alperton (CofE) near Wembley*](http://www.stjamesalperton.org.uk/)*in London and writes this[[1]](#endnote-1):* Governments seek to win popular support by being ‘tough’ on those who seek entry to their countries, avoiding any discussion about what might prompt someone to take such risks with themselves and with their families. Political solutions will be nuanced and multi-faceted, but we must bear in mind that each person in any given news story is an individual created in God’s image and dearly loved.

Ali-Afzal came from Afghanistan to the UK as a teenager. He walked into our church on an impulse, asked for prayer, and came to faith in Jesus. He told us his story over the next year – his family attacked by the Taliban, his father killed in front of him, his uncles paying a broker to get him out of the country, journeys on foot through Pakistan, in the back of a truck to Turkey, in one of two small boats to Greece (watching the other capsize with the death of all on board), by plane to France and by truck to the UK. The journey took five years and involved many compromises and humiliations. His healing is still ongoing.

He told us once that several times he had wanted to kill himself and had come to our home to say goodbye and somehow found himself leaving with hope for another day without us ever knowing – but he is healing. He has found good news and freedom which he is growing into day by day, as the church welcomes him and stands beside him.

Announce, release, recovery, set free.

Jesus was moving in the power of the Spirit. The Spirit of God is called the empowerer, the guide, the comforter. In this week of Prayer for Christian Unity the Spirit is also the one who unites us – we are one in the Spirit.

When you read of the Spirit’s work in scripture the Spirit of God prompts us into mission – places on our hearts burdens and passions for certain things – promptings to get involved in certain actions. Is the Spirit of God upon you? Where is the Spirit of God prompting you? Try not to resist – because actually that is where you will probably find your deepest fulfilment. Much better to be doing stuff that deep down is where your gifts and your passion and drive lies – where you are a round peg in a round hole. Often we end up in jobs that are not really us and sometimes we get stuck there.

Sometimes we exercise our Godly anointing in our work – that is where God has called us and uses us.

In the passage from 1 Corinthians 12 Paul continues his teaching on how the Spirit of God gives gifts to all the members of the church and specifically he addresses what it means for this community to function with mutual care and respect. Not seeing certain gifts as being inferior or superior but all needed for the building up of the Body of Christ, the church – all the gifts needed for the common good.

There is a beautiful, profound simplicity in Paul’s use of the body as an image of what it means to be part of the body of Christ. We are all equally important.

Some of us may already know that we’re important. Maybe we have had a childhood and education that helped us to be confident of our own worth. Perhaps we have recognised status in our communities, as a leader, an influencer, a minister, or whatever it is.

But not everyone feels like that. Many of us may feel unimportant and not particularly valuable. Perhaps we are young, queer, black, poor, disabled, female, mentally distressed. Maybe we are homeless, or refugees. Perhaps we struggle with addiction, or have been abused or imprisoned.

How extraordinary and powerful it is, then, to hear Paul’s confident assertion that we are actually indispensable, and will be treated with greater honour and respect! How affirming and strengthening does that feel?

If you read through the Vision 2030 document you will see how we divide up the various areas of the church’s work – administration, property, worship and education, mission, pastoral care and under each are some suggestions for ways forward in each area whilst acknowledging all the good things which are already happening in our church.

Some people may have pastoral gifts – the sort of people others find it easy to talk with, who are good at listening and can empathise, the type of individuals other confide in and who have a great love and concern for others ;

Some find great fulfilment in organising something well and making something happen and that it is well run - a gift in administration;

Others are practical and enjoy doing a task with a end in sight and that they can then stand back and think job well done ; Others have a great passion to see a more just world, to care for the poor, to share the good news of the Christian faith and see others come to faith – they are gifted in Mission;

Others take their delight in worshipping God and leading others in worship, a deep desire to understand scripture and share that with others, an ability to communicate and lead others in prayer - to put into words what others may be thinking – a gift for worship and education.

Where is the Spirit on you? Where are you being prompted to be part of the agenda of Jesus? In our daily life, in your work or vocation, in the church.

Announce, release, recovery, set free.

May God fill us with His Spirit and help us in worship and service to use the many gifts we have been given.



**Prayers of intercession**

Dear God, as food prices rise and fuel costs increase, we pray for wisdom in how we use our resources. Guide us and help us not to overspend. We pray for those who struggle to pay their bills and those in debt. We ask your blessing on food banks, debt counselling services and credit unions. Help us all to be generous in supporting one another and sharing what we have.

May your kingdom come
**through our prayers, actions and words.**

Dear God, we pray for our justice system, for the police, lawyers, judges, probation officers and those who work in our prisons. May justice be served in the courts. May all be treated with fairness and equity. Be with those who have been convicted and those serving prison sentences and support their families and all whom they love. May your presence bring comfort and hope.

May your kingdom come
**through our prayers, actions and words.**

Dear God, sometimes the way forward is unclear, we hope for easing of restrictions, but we wonder about the timing or risks. Give insight to scientists and politicians that we may be led in the right direction and be encouraged by the hope which your Spirit offers us.

May your kingdom come
**through our prayers, actions and words.**

Dear God, in these challenging times give wisdom and strength to those who are trapped in lives of addiction, who feel there is no escape. We pray for Alcoholics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Drug Addicts Anonymous and all groups who seek to show people a path through addiction and offer kindness and support.

May your kingdom come
**through our prayers, actions and words.**

Dear God, we thank you for the mission and ministry of Jesus, for the challenge he offers, the peace with which he fills us and his love which inspires us. We pray that we may find imaginative ways to share his love and to proclaim his good news. Bless the church throughout the world. Enable the stronger to support the more vulnerable that Jesus name may be known and honoured in every place.

May your kingdom come
**through our prayers, actions and words.**

Hear us for Jesus’ sake.
**Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

God, you call us to be the body of Christ in this place.
Side by side, hand in hand, help us to stand together,
to stand with our neighbours,
to break free from all that holds us back
from making the world as you want it to be.
In Jesus’ name.
**Amen.**

1. https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2022/117-january-february-2022-c/epiphany-3/the-week-in-focus [↑](#endnote-ref-1)