

What's today?

Sermon preached by The Reverend Canon Dr John Parr
St Edmundsbury Cathedral, January 27th 2019 (Epiphany 4)

What's today?

This is Sunday January 27th 2019. The fourth Sunday of Epiphany. The weekend. Sunday lunch, perhaps. A day of rest.

"Sunday is our busiest day", said the man who sold us a mattress about a year ago, on a Sunday. "We're rushed off our feet on Sundays".

Today is this Cathedral's busiest day. Our Sabbath day.

It's the Sabbath in Nazareth too, and people are gathered in the synagogue. Jesus - the rabbi and healer - is in town, his hometown. He's in the synagogue too, as usual. They give him the scroll so that he can read from the Scriptures. From the prophet Isaiah.

Fresh from his baptism, filled with the Spirit, he finds where it says: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor". Jesus plays fast and loose with the text. Slipping in a few words from an earlier passage. Missing out others from the one in front of him. Highlighting the prophet's announcement of blessing and freedom for God's people, before handing the scroll back to the attendant.

And then, the most startling statement of all: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing".

What's today, Jesus? It's the day when the prophet's hopes for a new world - freedom, prosperity, security - are at last coming to life. Because Jesus is performing them in his ministry in Galilee. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me".

There are now 61 days until March 29th. What's today? 61 days from Brexit. Freedom - taking back control. Prosperity - making our own trade deals. Security - drawing on our own strengths, like we've always done. 61 days until we can say, "the hopes and promises of June 23rd 2016 - Referendum Day - are being fulfilled before our very eyes". For good or ill, who knows?

Today is also 35 days from CAP Sunday. 'CAP Sunday'? Church Action on Poverty, a Christian campaigning organisation now based in Salford. CAP draws attention to the plight of people who struggle to feed their families, to heat their homes (if they have one), to clothe their kids.

Why do we need a 'today' to do that? Perhaps to remind us of Jesus' 'today' in the synagogue at Nazareth. Jesus announced that the new world created by the Spirit was taking shape today, in his compassionate commitment to those whose hopes were

stretched and exhausted.

“Today God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor”.

What do you make of the power struggles playing out in the Brexit drama? The leaders of the EU. The Prime Minister. The Government. Parliament. Factions within Parliament. ‘The People’. The Media. Today I ask myself how Jesus might have gone about Brexit.

“The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor”. When Jesus sets about making a better world, he doesn’t focus on those in the limelight, in the media spotlight, in the corridors of power. He seems much more interested in those who live on the edges.

Do you remember the Spice Girls? Formed 25 years ago, they became the biggest selling female pop group of all time, 85 million records worldwide. Four of them have just re-formed for a 13 date UK tour, and tickets are selling fast.

As well as their music and the ‘girl power’ they inspired, the Spice Girls are famous for their merchandising. The latest example is a Comic Relief T-shirt they’re promoting, with ‘I Wanna Be A Spice Girl’ emblazoned across the front. It’s part of a gender justice campaign. But last week newspapers reported that the women who made the garments in a Bangladesh factory were paid just 35p an hour. Some of them worked 16 hour shifts during which they suffered verbal abuse and harassment.

Before we wring our hands too much, it’s worth reminding ourselves that their hourly rate is equivalent to £9 an hour here. Our living wage for those aged 25 and over is £8.21 an hour, which is barely enough to live on. Another example of the way of the world today - the world on our doorstep too. The Spice Girls, textile workers, shop assistants. Extremes of wealth and poverty, as close as clothes on skin.

In the job I now do for the Diocese, I’m working with the Bishops on a programme they’ve devised to train people for ordination ‘in-house’. I’ve been listening to the stories candidates tell of what’s happening in their parishes.

A benefice on the borders of Suffolk and Norfolk reaches out to people on the edges of life in our diocese. Their priest-in-charge is encouraging them to look beyond the comfort and security of ‘their’ church, and learn how to welcome and value and love those who wouldn’t previously have darkened its doors. In late November she invited the public - anyone - to help decorate the church for Christmas. People came. For some it was their first time in the building. They were received in a spirit of hospitality and celebration.

What’s today, for this borderland church community? It’s a day of welcome for cheeky kids, for people with nowhere else to turn, for the variety of migrant workers in their town. Here is a parish church that takes seriously words of St. Paul in this morning’s reading. Paul no longer sees Jesus as an individual person: “Christ is like a single body with many members”. And we are “the body of Christ” because “by one Spirit - the

same Spirit that anointed him at his baptism - we are all baptised into one body". You and I are christened and called to live as the hands and ears and eyes and head and feet and mouth of the Anointed One.

His today is meant to be our today, as we realise our calling to perform God's special blessing for those whose hope is stretched and exhausted. The homeless we walk past in the town. The people who rely on the Storehouse food bank here in Bury. Workers who struggle to make ends meet on minimum wages.

What's today? 35 days to CAP Sunday. 61 days to Brexit. Please don't hear me wrongly when I say this, but I don't believe that we'll be judged by the way we voted in the referendum. Or whether we now want a People's Vote. Or a hard or a soft Brexit. Or no Brexit at all. Not that these issues don't matter - they surely do. But what matters most is whether we in the body of Christ, the baptised people of God, are prepared to make his today our own.

What a great message for a distressed world. Just imagine. Today, the poor, the captives, the oppressed seeing God's new world taking shape before their very eyes, because the millions of people throughout the world who share the baptism of Jesus realise that we are the the heads and hands and feet and ears and eyes of the Anointed one.

"The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor". I wonder how this Scripture might be fulfilled in our hearing today.

Canon Dr John Parr

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