

Sermon for Holy Trinity Church on Sunday 26 January 2025 at 9am
The Third Sunday of Epiphany

Texts: Nehemiah 8.1-3, 5-6, 8-10; I Corinthians 12.12-31a; Luke 4.14-21

Which Manifesto?

Ripples spread from the USA on Monday this week around the world as President Trump outlined his manifesto to 'Put America First' in his inauguration address to the American people. From cutting illegal migration, radically raising oil and gas production ("Drill, baby, drill"), imposing substantial tariffs on imports and defining what gender means, he has put out a very clear message. Moreover, with his signing of a whole batch of Executive Orders that very same day, he has signalled that he is a politician who intends to follow through on his manifesto. Some are delighted whilst others are dismayed.

Today we've heard a very different manifesto as Jesus, preaching for the first time in his home synagogue of Nazareth, outlines his vision. At this point, Jesus had already been baptised by John the Baptist and had been affirmed by God as His Son, as the Holy Spirit descended upon him. He had undergone a rigorous period of discernment and testing in the wilderness as he sought to find out what God was calling him to do. Following that, he started his ministry, preaching in Capernaum and healing the sick. By the time Jesus proclaimed his vision, a vision often describes as 'The Nazarene Manifesto', he was very clear about both nature of his calling and the message of God which he is proclaiming.

It is a radical vision, rooted on restoring justice to the poor, the outcast and those with least influence in society, promising them of acceptance and welcome in God's kingdom. But it is also radical because just as his mother Mary had glimpsed as she proclaimed the Magnificat, for this to happen, there were implications for those who currently held power, influence and control.

I, along with many others, admired the courage of the Bishop of Washington, Bishop Mariann Budde, who in her sermon at President Trump's inauguration service on Monday, gently yet firmly spoke 'truth to power'. This is never easy to do and certainly not with the eyes of the world upon you, not least the newly-elected President and his family sitting just a few metres away.

In her address, the Bishop started by reminding the President that true unity is always rooted on seeking the common good and respecting our differences. She pointed out that there is no purpose to our prayers which we utter at church and at home if they do not affect our actions – in fact, they rebound against us. Then she went on to identify that unity depends on three things: honouring, honesty and humility.

Honouring involves recognising the inherent dignity of every human being as a child of God and treating them accordingly. Honesty is about speaking the truth to each other directly, in love and Christian charity. And humility is about recognising our

fallibility and resisting the temptation to proclaim that we are right and thus our opponent is wrong. She identified how easily that leads to us demonising the other person and dehumanising them which we then use to justify treating them unfairly.

The Bishop faced a backlash from the President who accused her of 'not being very good at her job' and demanded an apology. It's worth reminding ourselves that if we read the rest of St Luke's account of Jesus' Nazarene Manifesto in the Nazareth synagogue, it ended with the community dragging him out and attempting to hurl him off a cliff.

Hearing what our faith is about, what God is asking of us is often uncomfortable. Bishop Mariann reminded us of the nature of the God we worship who raises up the despised, who welcomes the outcast, who accepts those whom we are keen to reject, who calls for radical justice and the hallowing of each person.

She was courageous in preaching this sermon. However, it should make us think what kind of world we are living in when this call to remind us of the nature of God and his kingdom provokes such a violent backlash. A world where fear, intimidation and lack of basic courtesy, fuelled by social media, exploit our differences and encourage us to live for ourselves and our interest groups alone, without thinking about our accountability and the consequences this may have on one another, particularly those who are poor and vulnerable.

We have just concluded the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. At this time, it is more important than ever that Christians are able to witness together that in Christ, there is an alternative way of living, rooted on love and hope, in contrast to the fear and greed which characterises our world and behaviour at present.

But for us to do this, we have to learn what it really means to live as a community rooted in Christ within our own churches. To do this, I think we can do no better than to embrace those three aspects of true unity to which Bishop Mariann referred - honouring, honesty and humility.

Honouring involves learning to see Christ in each person, however different they may be from us and respecting their inherent dignity and worth as a child of God.

Honesty is about trying with integrity to live our daily lives by the light of the Gospel. It's about looking frankly at the prayers we are offering to God each day and what we are actually then planning to do in practice. Do the two match up? If not, what is happening? Is it that in practice, we don't really want to put ourselves out to try and make this happen? If we see this disparity, asking ourselves what we are going to do about it.

Humility is rooted on that wonderful image of the human body which St Paul gives us in 1 Corinthians and the parallel he then draws with our Christian communities. It links back to honesty because its starting point is realising our own weaknesses, ignorance and foibles and not trying to be superman or superwoman.

It is about learning as our starting point, that we need and rely on God as the very source of our life. Realising that we need the presence of Christ beside us. Accepting that daily we need to be guided and inspired by God's Holy Spirit.

Humility is about the gracious acceptance of our individual weaknesses and failures whilst constantly seeking, both as individual and as a community, to live by the light of the Gospel, living out Jesus' Nazarene Manifesto. It's not easy to do this and often we err too much one way or the other – either being too judgemental thus driving members of our community out or being too accepting, conniving when our behaviour and actions are unjust and selfish.

It is a point made powerfully by a victim of sexual abuse in a recent letter to the Church Times (10 January 2025). The writer made the point that whilst they had been badly let down by their bishop (now deceased) who failed to act and the Church, the Makin Report was being used as a stick to attack individuals rather than a tool for the national good. The writer went to say:

'We should have no truck with abusers but need to ensure that we don't lose those who have made errors (as have we all) but can lead desperately needed change'.

Humility is also about learning to recognise that we do need one another for us to flourish as a community and rejoicing in the gifts which others have which we may lack. If I just look around Holy Trinity during the Sunday services, I experience this in so many different ways – for example, witnessing the skills of our Tech Team (an area which is a closed book to me), the wonderful singing of our choir (certainly not my forte), the exuberance, and fresh vision which our children and young people bring, and the wisdom, rooted in long experience of the older members of our congregation.

Patrick Baker, along with his wife, spent seven years living in a Christian community called Scargill in the North of England. It's a sister community to Lee Abbey in the South of England where our MES intern, Eleanor, is currently working. Reflecting on their experience of community life, he spoke of the joys of friendship, of a broadening outlook and deeper understanding, which it brought. But he also spoke powerfully of how community life reveals our weaknesses and need for each other and challenges our selfishness. The greatest joys of community life he identified is that we are accepted for what we are not what as we wish to present ourselves and we are helped to become more nearly, the people God created us to be (*Church Times interview – 10 January 2025*).

Today we have to choose by which manifesto we are willing to live and dedicate our lives. May God guide us and help us to choose the manifesto of Jesus and to live and proclaim by our lives together as a community, that unity and love for which God has created us.

Amen