

26th January 2025: 3rd Sunday of Epiphany – Year C, Luke 4:14-21

It's been quite a week when we survey events across the Pond, as they say, and the inauguration of the 47th President of the United States. I wonder if you could stomach watching the event itself. Many, I know, could not and understandably so. Donald Trump painted a dystopian picture of America under his predecessor. He repeated his 'America First' rhetoric, stoking the fears and grievances of his political base. His remarks lacked any plans for addressing key issues like climate change, economic inequality and healthcare. In his first actions this convicted felon pardoned hundreds of insurrectionists, responsible for the riots on the 6th January four years ago, and signed orders targeting protections for immigrants and civil servants. For many, these events served as a sobering reminder of how far the nation has drifted from its ideals of unity and democratic stability.

Perhaps you also saw on Tuesday the widely reported remarks of The Bishop of Washington, the Right Revd Marian Edgar Budde who preached with such courage and dignity, face to face before the President. She said this:

'As you told the nation yesterday, you have felt the providential hand of a loving God. In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now...there are gay, lesbian and transgender children in Democratic, Republican and independent families, some who fear for their lives.' She preached that the *'vast majority of immigrants are not criminals,'* but *'good neighbours'* and *'faithful members'* of religious communities. She drew attention to the children of parents now threatened with deportation. She drew attention to the plight of refugees and those fleeing persecution. She reminded him that our faith proclaims mercy to the stranger, the dignity of every person and the importance of humility.

It was quite a contrast with the appallingly sycophantic remarks of Franklin Graham when he declared at Trump's inauguration *'look what God has done'*...We have seen a particularly worrying fusion of so-called Christian identity with support for this President.

Christians have always subscribed to a wide range of political ideologies and sought to pin their political colours upon the Cross. It's something, I think, we should always be wary of and guard against, and in these more extreme examples the need for this is all the more overt. Given my own political background, this is something I'm always quite wary of. One former Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey, writes on priesthood and politics *'the true radical is not the one who suspends himself from the branches on either the left or the right, but the one who in their thinking and action goes to the root of the tree'*. (Radix – root of radical)

That, I think, is what Bishop Budde was doing in her remarks. That Trump and Vice President Vance were so affronted by it was very revealing. It reminds us that political leaders should be made to sit in front of senior clergy and be reminded of the Gospel! She assured the President of her prayers for him, insisted she didn't see him as an enemy and spoke of respectful disagreement rather than resorting to violence. By contrast, Trump called Budde a *'Radical Left hard line Trump hater'*.

Bishop Budde stood up and said what needed to be said. She reminded Trump that the gospel is good news for the poor, for the oppressed, for those who cannot truly see. A gospel we are reminded of from St Luke this morning – a gospel famed for its bias towards the marginalised and the outcast; where it is women who first learn of the resurrection; where the songs of Mary and Elizabeth are given such prominence, where we hear the story of the Good Samaritan, the Beatitudes – *'blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek, blessed are the merciful'*, the penitent and forgiven thief and Jesus' table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners.

In today's gospel Jesus stands in the synagogue, and reads from the Prophet Isaiah. *'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour'*. This text would have been very familiar to Jesus' audience. It was an Old Testament prophecy concerning the release of the Jews from the Babylonian captivity. But Jesus takes this text and locates its deepest meaning within himself. He changes and expands the meaning of the *'poor'*, the *'captives'* and the *'blind'*.

In Isaiah, the *'poor'* likely referred to those who were materially impoverished and oppressed during Israel's exile. In Luke, the *'poor'* also includes the *'poor in spirit'*; those who recognise their need of God. In Isaiah, the *'captives'* are literal; those exiled or imprisoned longing for Israel's restoration. In Luke, Jesus proclaims freedom from sin, guilt and evil. This liberation is about something deeper found in relationship with God. In Isaiah, the *'blind'* referred to physical blindness and the resulting marginalisation. In Luke, yes Jesus heals physical blindness but the reference so often is deeper, meaning spiritual blindness. He brings sight to those who are spiritually lost or ignorant of God's truth, helping them to see the light of His Kingdom. So Jesus' reinterpretation of this passage, seen by word and deed, fulfils Isaiah's prophecy in a way that transcends its original historical and cultural context. And so, we are told, *'the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him'*.

Who do we look to for the values, principles and character that shapes and guides our own lives? It cannot be our political leaders, heaven forbid this latest President. It cannot be our Prime Ministers or other public representatives, however noble we may think them to be. It cannot be the latest rising podcaster or social media guru. *'The eyes of all were fixed on him'*. The answer is rooted in our scriptures. It can only be Jesus. The same Lord who inspires people today to stand up against oppression, to speak up for the marginalised and excluded, to proclaim God's love for all people. The words of our final hymn seem fitting in this call *'O let me see thy footmarks, and in them plant mine own, my hope to follow duly is in thy strength alone; o guide me, call me, draw me, uphold me to the end; and then in heaven receive me, My Saviour and my Friend'*. *'The eyes of all were fixed on him'*. Let us fix our eyes upon Jesus, this day and always, and in all that lies ahead. Amen.