

OUR PERSONAL MANIFESTO

I wonder, do you have a personal manifesto, a statement of what you want to achieve in life? Probably not. But what about an epitaph? How would we like to be remembered? I asked someone this the other day and he said 'I'd like my epitaph to be 'He made an impact''. Good – he wanted to make a difference in his ministry (he's a priest). He wanted to leave things better than he found them.

I rather like the epitaph on the tombstone of one Sydney Smythe that said 'Cherished by his wife. Rest in peace – until we meet again.' Or one in Yorkshire that says: 'Here lies the father of 29. It would have been more but he didn't have time.'

How do we want to be remembered? What do we want to achieve? What would be our manifesto?

Jesus was very clear about his. He'd come home to Nazareth. Mary had doubtless cleaned the house, got out the yellow ribbons and had her hair done. Some months before, like many a young adult, Jesus had decided it was time to leave home. He'd gone to meet his cousin John down by the river near Jericho, and got himself baptised. Then he'd gone walkabout for several weeks in the desert, and now it seemed he was setting up home in Capernaum, by the sea of Galilee. But right now he'd come home, back to Nazareth.

And he's gone to the synagogue on the Sabbath and read from scripture, as any adult male was allowed to do. Note those things – synagogue, Sabbath, scripture. Jesus was a faithful Jew. He never turned his back on his faith community – he just longed for them to understand what it was all about at a deeper level, what it was really saying.

So it was in the synagogue that Jesus read out his manifesto. When you go to Nazareth today you're taken to an ancient synagogue with a barrel-shaped roof, and you sit round the edge listening to someone like me reading Luke 4. It can't be the actual synagogue Jesus went to because it dates from a much later period, but it's right to read what Jesus said there because (as I always say) 100 yards either way this did indeed happen. Jesus launched his manifesto around here.

It came from Isaiah 61. Jesus was given the privilege of reading from scripture that morning. Perhaps because he was a bit of a celebrity already. The boy done good. Everybody knew him – remember Nazareth was a village of only two or three hundred people. They were delighted to have him back. And he chose this passage from the scroll of Isaiah because it summed up what he'd come to do – *and who he was*.

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me.' Let's stop there. If he'd been anointed that meant he was the messiah, the one long awaited. Big claim.

'He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, liberty for those who are oppressed.' And yes, we can recognise all of that

in Jesus' later ministry. He always stood alongside the 'anawim', the little people, those on the edge, the outsiders who always missed out when power, privilege, wealth, justice, opportunity, *anything good* was being given out. Track through Jesus' ministry and he was always on the side of the poor.

But note one thing also. He declared the year of the Lord's favour, the year of release which supposedly took place every 50 years to give everyone a clean sheet and a new start. It's here, he said, now. But *he didn't complete the quote from Isaiah 61*, because it goes on, 'to proclaim the year of the Lords favour, *and the day of vengeance of our God.*'

He doesn't say that. That wasn't part of Jesus' message. Indeed, Jesus' whole way of interpreting scripture was to be positive and go to the heart of what it meant. Of all the books of the OT he just has a few favourites – Exodus, Deut, Isaiah, Hosea, the Psalms. He quotes just once from Lev, and its the one positive mandate among long lists of negative rules in that book. What is it? *Love your neighbour as yourself*. And he does the most radical thing of all for a loyal Jew – 'The law says, *but I say...*' Wow, that was taking on God's authority!

So Jesus knew where he was going. He was on his way to proclaim sensational good news, and if that brought him into conflict with the Establishment, so be it. Today, he said, what Isaiah looked forward to has come true, it's here.

Today. I love that word. It's actually the first word *of his own* that Luke records Jesus ever saying. Today, it's come true. The time of God is today, not someday, today.

I wonder if we've grasped that one? The time of God is today, not yesterday, when Jesus roamed around Galilee. Not someday, when someone else can respond and do the business. It's today. Now. This is God's time. Pushing it back into the past or off into the future are just ways of distancing ourselves from the immediacy and urgency of God's mission. It's now. For us.

What difference is being here *today* going to make to what we do *tomorrow*? How is loving God today going to show itself in loving my neighbour tomorrow? Particularly if my neighbour is really annoying. How is my care for the planet, and what I believe about climate change, going to impact my consumption of meat, or my air miles (I speak to myself)? How will the way I speak about Brexit cool the heated divisions that are catching fire around us and undermining civilised discourse?

Perhaps it does go back to our own manifesto after all. *What are we trying to do*? Not 'just get by' I hope, but somehow to make a difference. Not 'be nice to squirrels,' but seriously to look after this precious planet. Not 'live comfortably and don't be a nuisance to others' but to be a contributor to a society that's committed to the common good.

A basic problem in the West is that we have so much to live **with**, and not enough to live **for**. Perhaps we'd like to think about our personal manifesto. What are we living for?

The American monk Thomas Merton said, 'If you want to know who I am, don't ask me where I live and what I do, but rather ask me what I'm living for, and ask me in very small particulars, why I'm doing so little about it.'

One man who did something about it was Alfred Nobel. He became rich, very rich, through the invention of dynamite. In 1888 he found himself reading his own obituary, because his brother had died and a French newspaper had got confused and printed Alfred's obituary by mistake. And in this obituary he read that he had been 'a merchant of death'. Alfred decided this was not how he wanted to be remembered, so in the rest of his life he set up the Nobel prizes for literature, peace, medicine, economics and the sciences. This became his manifesto and his epitaph. He wanted to work for, and leave behind, something of real value.

We may not think we can aim that high, but might we not in some way inhabit and make our own that dynamic manifesto of Jesus – and proclaim good news to the poor, liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, liberty for those who are oppressed, the year of the Lord's favour?

I'll leave the details to you.