

Luke 4. Jesus' manifesto

In the run up to a general election all the political parties produce their manifesto. It's their statement of intent, outlining what they hope to achieve, if they are successful in being elected to power.

During an election campaign, it is very easy to make idealistic promises, every party does it, about how they would solve the nation's problems, but often when they are elected, they find it's a totally different thing altogether to successfully implement their plans. When this happens, they always try to blame the opposition for their failures. In saying this I'm not trying to make a political point, supporting one party or the other; I'm simply making an observation about politics in general.

In this country, we are very blessed to have a democratic system whereby, every five years, we have a general election, when those in power are held to account and judged on how successful they have been in achieving their goals. If the electorate deem that they have been successful, then they can vote for them to remain in office, but if not, they can elect the opposition party, to see if they can do any better.

In our reading today Jesus sets out his manifesto for his ministry. He quotes from the prophet Isaiah, which was widely held to be a prophecy concerning the coming of the Messiah. He did this in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, soon after his baptism by John in the river Jordan, when as we saw a couple of weeks ago, Luke records, the Holy spirit descended upon him.

Luke tells us that having read the passage he rolled the scroll up again, handed it back to the attendant, before saying, much to everyone's amazement, today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

It is no wonder that those who heard Jesus make this astonishing claim questioned how he could possibly fulfil such a role. After all they said, he's just an ordinary lad, the son of Joseph, the Carpenter from down the road. Jesus made a truly amazing claim about the reason why God had sent him and the purpose of the Holy spirit coming to rest upon him. His mandate for ministry had five distinctive strands to it: to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, the recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

It was very easy for Jesus to make these claims, but just how successful was he in implementing this hugely challenging but significant manifesto? Did his actions match his words? Was he truly the Messiah or was he a fraud? Let's look at some of the evidence provided by the rest of the gospels for each of the various aspects of his mission statement.

To preach good news to the poor. Jesus did not spend all his time, as you might expect, with the religious leaders, far from it. In fact, he spent much more time with ordinary Jews, who were on the fringes of society. And he called fisherman and tax collectors to be his disciples. The primary focus of his teaching was to bring good news to those who were spiritually poor, informing them that God had not abandoned them but had sent Jesus to provide a way for them to come back to himself.

Jesus' teaching is still widely regarded as some of the best moral teaching that's ever been given, the sermon on the mount being a good case in point.

Yes, tick, I think that there is plenty of evidence to support the claim that Jesus fulfilled the first section of his mandate.

To proclaim freedom for the prisoners. Although Jesus did not literally storm the prisons and set captives free, the gospels clearly show us that he broke the chains that held many people captive, including those whose life had been blighted by all manner of sickness.

For example, he released those who suffered from the dreaded skin disease, leprosy. Because it was so contagious and there was no known cure anyone who caught the disease was immediately excluded from the community.

In chapter 17, Luke recalls the time when 10 lepers cried out from a distance to Jesus for him to heal them and he sent them to the priest, whose job it was to verify that they had been healed and could return to their families. On the way all 10 of them were healed but only one returned to say thank you.

On another occasion, Matthew recalls the story of a man who also had leprosy, who fell at Jesus feet asking him to have mercy upon him and Jesus reached out and touched him and instantly healed him.

Or what about the woman who had suffered bleeding for over 12 years who reached out and touched Jesus' cloak and was completely healed. Not to mention the woman caught in adultery who he refused to condemn or the Samaritan woman who he released from addictive relationships.

Yes, tick, there is plenty of evidence that Jesus also fulfilled this part of the Messianic mandate.

Recovery of sight to the blind. The gospels recount several stories of the blind physically receiving their sight again, including the story of Bartimaeus, who was sat begging on the outskirts of Jericho. When Jesus passed by, he cried out to him to have mercy upon him. He didn't give up when the disciples told him that Jesus was busy, and his persistence was rewarded.

Yes, once again, tick, there is more than enough evidence that supports Jesus' claim to be the Messiah.

To release the oppressed. Later in chapter 4, Luke recounts the time when Jesus was in the synagogue in Capernaum and was confronted by the man who was possessed by an evil spirit, who shouted out at the top of his voice, I know who you are. Jesus simply commanded the spirit to be quiet and to come out of him and the spirit left him.

Matthew also recounts the occasion while Jesus had been on the mount of transfiguration his disciples had been unable to set a boy free from the evil spirit that had been tormenting him. Jesus soon dealt with the problem.

Yes, again we can tick that box, there is plenty of evidence that Jesus really did fulfil this part of his mandate.

To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. The central core message that Jesus proclaimed throughout his three years of public ministry was that the Kingdom of God had come near to them. And he told the crowd that the signs that he performed was all the evidence that they needed to prove conclusively that this was the case. Yes, tick, once again the gospels clearly support the case that Jesus also fulfilled this final part of his mission statement.

This is just a tiny fraction of the evidence contained in the gospels that proves conclusively that Jesus fulfilled all the requirements of the Messiah. There can only be 1 possible conclusion, Jesus really was the long-awaited, promised saviour. Jesus demonstrates what can be achieved by someone who is genuinely filled with the Holy Spirit. That same Holy Spirit is available to all of us today. In John 14 verse 12 it says he who believes in me will do greater things but all I do. I don't know about you, but I find this verse very challenging.

My friend Mark recalls the time when a visitor from America who had a prophetic ministry visited his church. He had been riding around London on the underground. As you may be aware whenever the train pulls into a station there is an announcement, please mind the gap. My friends sensed God saying to him that this was a word for the church in our country today. We are to mind the gap between what we read about in the scriptures and the experience of the church. There is a huge discrepancy between what I read in the Bible on my own experience which leads me to pray, for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit to close the gap.

I recently came across an old hymn called send the fire, which I often use as a prayer. It was written by William Booth the founder of the Salvation Army who set up amazing work just over 100 years ago amongst the poor people of our country. These are some of the words: "oh God of burning cleansing flame, send the fire, your blood bought gift today we claim, send the fire today! Look down and see this waiting host, and send the promised Holy Ghost, we need another Pentecost, send the fire today."