

Release Of The Captives

1st hymn: By Henry Baker (T. Dominus regit me, John Dykes 1823-76)

- 1) The king of love my shepherd is whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am his and he is mine forever.
- 2) Where streams of living water flow my ransomed soul he leadeth,
And where the verdant pastures grow with food celestial feedeth.
- 3) Perverse and foolish oft I strayed but yet in love he sought me,
And on his shoulders gently laid, and home rejoicing brought me.
- 4) In death's dark vale I fear no ill with Thee dear Lord beside me,
Thy rod and staff me comfort still, thy cross before to guide me.
- 5) Thou spreadst a table in my sight; thy unction grace bestoweth;
And O what transport of delight from thy pure chalice floweth.
- 6) And so through all the length of days thy goodness faileth never:
good Shephed may I sing thy praise within thy house forever.

Prayers including intercessions:

Dear Heavenly Father, we first thank you for the wonderful late autumn, winter, and now early spring rains in a year when the prediction was for a drier than usual year. We know that no false god ever sends rain!

*Your Servant Paul asked us to pray for all those in authority – so for our King, our leaders state and federal, who constantly make decisions on our behalf. We pray therefore for wisdom and discernment for them as they decide and choose how to lead us. Grant them balance and good sense, that we might live a quiet and peaceable life and proceed in good living.

*We pray again for your persecuted church, those faithful to Christ, especially in countries where corruption and abuse of power hold sway, where opposition to Christ and His way are strong – even leading to the killing of the faithful. Strengthen those who take a stand for Christ, let their witness be seen and heard, bold and true to Him, that others may have opportunity to be won and enter your Kingdom because of the power of your demonstrated truth.

In that regard, let the witness of your servants in *this* country be also true to your word and your standard – help them to speak into the public arena, into the parliaments and wherever they will be heard, and demonstrate the truths of that Kingdom. And let not the rising opposition to your truth in *this* country be able to silence and blot out that truth.

*We pray again for Ukraine, with the unjust invasion of their neighbour Russia to destroy and pillage. We thank you that many in that country look to you, and we thank you for the support coming from so many other countries, who realise the unfairness and bullying nature of the invasion, and have come to their aid. Grant Ukraine strength to stand and reject Mr. Putin's aggression, and we ask, Father, that he be stopped however that can best be effected.

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*We pray for those attempting to help the injured and bring order in Morocco and Libya. We can only guess at how terrible are their circumstances. Father, lead them to accept the help offered by so many in the world, and assist them in sorting the many problems to re-establish order in the community.

*And so bless your faithful ones, let your kingdom come, and your will be done on earth, even as it is in heaven. For we pray these prayers in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Readings:

- Isaiah 61:1-6
- Luke 4:16-30

Second hymn: *by George Briggs* (T. Hymn to joy, Ludwig van Beethoven)

- 1) God has spoken by his prophets, spoken his unchanging word,
Each, from age to age proclaiming God, the one, the righteous Lord.
'Mid the world's despair and turmoil one sure anchor holding fast:
God is king, his throne eternal, God the first, and God the last.
- 2) God has spoken by Christ Jesus, Christ the everlasting Son,
brightness of the father's glory, with the Father ever one;
spoken by the Word incarnate, God from God, ere time began,
Light from Light, to earth descending, Man, revealing God to man.
- 3) God is speaking by his Spirit, speaking to the hearts of men,
in the age-long word expounding God's own message, now as then,
through the rise and fall of nations one sure faith yet standing fast;
God still speaks, his word unchanging, God the first and God the last.

Sermon: Release of the captives

It was a great surprise that a man so familiar to them should stand in that little synagogue in Nazareth, read a familiar and great prophecy from one of their sacred books, then claim that it was being fulfilled that very day!

For he was no stranger, and almost certainly he had read such passages before, for any one approved by the Elders could read the Word of God.

And then he sat down, but not to be silent, but this time to teach. (The teachers of the law always sat). And every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him – because they did indeed know him. He was a local.

But the passage was the wonderful prophecy of Isaiah, about the time and ministry of Messiah, where this anointed One was to preach the truth, proclaim (and administer) release to the captives, have blindness healed, relieve the oppressed and proclaim the Lord's favour through Messiah.

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And he finished by saying “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”.

He had done many things, not just taught. And they had heard of the things that he had done in the north of the country in the vicinity of Capernaum, in the early part of his ministry.

Yet here he was, in their own village, this “son of Joseph”.

But he found them not accepting. (...as in Mk 6) “But we know this man!” But did they?

“We know his family – his 4 brothers and his sisters.” And they took offence at him.

A lot had happened since he had left the village.

His cousin John had preached for some time about the coming of the holy One of God, and asked Israel to prepare themselves by submitting to the baptism of repentance. Then probably to everyone’s surprise Jesus himself had been baptised, as he said “to fulfil all righteousness”. Almost certainly he had no need to be baptised, because he had no need of repentance – was this as a sign of his complete identification with us (who needed both)? But of course as he did the Holy Spirit of God came down on him, without whom I believe he would not have begun his ministry. And a voice spoke from heaven “Thou art my beloved Son, with Thee I am well pleased”. That was his “coronation” foretold a 1000 years before in Psalm 2.

Yes, this man was prepared fully for ministry, and here Jesus was on about doing just that.

But it was all too astounding for them. *Familiarity had bred contempt!*

He might have been insulted by them if he was thin-skinned enough, so he said “doubtless you will quote me the proverb “Physician heal thyself; what we’ve heard you did in Capernaum do here also.” Did they mean “Heal your reputation with usdo a miracle.”? In other words “Let us see some of the miracles you have been doing elsewhere.” So *a private show for us of your miraculous powers*. But he had no place for “doing tricks to order for the curious”. That was not what miracles were about. That is not why Messiah came. He did only what authenticated the word of truth he was preaching, and was in accord with the leading of the Spirit of his Father. He commented that a true prophet is not believed where people were not open to God’s true ministry. So he, probably sadly, could not function as God’s true servant there. They were not looking to God for his help. In Mark 6 we read the same story, a variation on this event, where he “Could do no mighty works – he just laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. And he marvelled at their unbelief”.

Here he quoted 2 examples where in ancient times in Israel, God chose to help 2 non-Jewish people with their big problems, the widow of Zarephath whom he saved from starvation, and Naaman the Syrian whose leprosy was healed, while omitting to heal any of the Jews. These were really *judgements* on God’s people in their day. This was only their actual history, but it so enraged his townspeople that they attempted murder, put him out of the city, and took him to the brow of a hill to throw him off and kill him. But God protected him – it was “not his time” and he simply passed through their midst and departed.

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How sad that his own village missed the ministry of Messiah because of their bias and contempt, by which they cut themselves off from God's blessing.

Their heart was exposed – the heart of man, from which, Jesus said, evil thoughts, murder, adultery, etc. come.

1) By the Word of God The Messiah preached with authority.

He was anointed – only the Spirit of God could communicate this ministry, never “the gift of the gab”. I knew a man, son of a Minister in the Methodist church, who had the “gift of the gab” and great personal confidence (he had trained in “public speaking” and could speak on almost any subject.) So he once went to preach at a church – but he did not really understand the gospel, nor did he have the Spirit of God. To his surprise he only lasted 10 minutes. He found he had nothing authoritative to preach. His skills were not translated into effective preaching. It was much later that he became a Christian – then he could preach, with the Spirit's help.

And then the word of God became “the sword of the Spirit”. It is not our sword! It is to be preached, not argued. It is for the conquering of the hearts and wills of men, not for hot-shot theologians to argue over, or debaters to hit each other over the head with. But as the Spirit's weapon it is immensely powerful.

Luther wrote a hymn, about the word of God, and Satan...

“and let the prince of ill look grim as e'er he will
he harms us not a whit, for why, his doom is writ,
a little word will slay him”.

In Rev 19:19-21 there is a big battle:

the beast, the false prophet, and kings of the earth on one side -
versus the King on his white horse, and the armies of heaven, on the other.

It is known as Armageddon – the King on his white horse wins the battle by the sword, the word of God. There is really no other battle comparable.

We always under-estimate the word of God -

...by the word of God men will live: by the word of God men will die.

2) Messiah also preached recovering of sight to the blind.

This gaining of sight was predominantly metaphorical, but was acted out more literally and very memorably in John 9 where Jesus healed the man born blind. This man was amazed – both at the miracle and by his understanding of who this man must be. The man healed was a simple man, but knew immediately that this stranger must be “of God”, at least a prophet! He wasn't remotely impressed by the Pharisees' opinion that this man must be sinner (for not obeying a Pharisaical law about the sabbath). He didn't even care. He engaged in the beautiful irony of saying what a marvel it was: they didn't know where he came from, but he opened his blind eyes. By his logic, he must have come from God. How could he be just a sinner?

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And Jesus made a strong statement: “For judgment I came into the world, that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind”. Both the act of giving understanding of the truth, and opening blind eyes were really miracles.

Coming to the light is not an action of man but of God. We are not like moths, or millipedes – Jesus said “this is the condemnation (judgment), that light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.” (Jn 3:19)

The gospel therefore is always a work of grace – it is never deserved. It is revelation, not logic, and can never be worked out by man’s ability, nor his mere I.Q.

St Paul puts it simply in his letter to the Colossians; “he has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the Kingdom of His beloved Son.” (Col 1:13)

Or as he said to the Corinthians “for it is the One who said ‘let light shine out of darkness’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:3)

3) "Release to the captives and oppressed" – this presumes they are captive *to something!*

What do we need to be freed from? People’s opinions vary widely.

Too high taxes? Bad working conditions? High interest rates? Inflation?

If we think any of those things, we are ignorant of our benefits in this land.

Political oppositions tend to speak about things like “our falling standard of living”. But the facts are that in all these things we are better off, for instance, than Americans – even years ago they had a 38 hr week, and 4 weeks holiday per year; we get a special loading on ours (I suppose our unions have been busier!) At International Conferences our American friends used to be amazed at the benefits Australians enjoy.

Yet – we have one of the highest suicide rates in the world. In our 15-24 yr age group the greatest cause of death is suicide. Yet we have everything needed for a contented life. So it is not that we lack any material benefit. It can only be that we perceive an *insufficient reason to live*. Purpose-less lives have no hope, and without hope, there is no point in life. Our grandparents had little of what we have, probably died younger, yet were content. So it is not *things*, but *purpose* that is essential to sustain meaningful life.

Multitudes of people in history have simply accepted the statements of the word of God:

Isaiah 53:5 – *But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes, we are healed.*

1 Cor 15:3 – *For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried and was raised again on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.*

1 Peter 2:24 – *Jesus himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds we have been healed.*

Many have believed the authority of these words, and come to release and God’s salvation. We would be wise to do the same.

Amen

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Third hymn: *by Frances Alstyne aka Fanny Crosby* (T. To God be the glory William Doane)

1. To God be the glory great things He hath done,
so loved He the world that He gave us His Son,
who yielded His life and atonement to sin and opened the life-gate that all may go in.

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, let the earth hear His voice!

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, let the people rejoice!

*O come to the Father through Jesus the Son,
and give Him the glory, great things He hath done.*

2. O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood,
to every believer the promise of God!
and every offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.
3. Great things he has taught us, great things he has done,
and great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son,
but purer and higher, and greater will be our wonder, our rapture, when Jesus we see.

Benediction:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all.
Amen.

This service was prepared by Neil McIntosh (M.B.B.S. F.R.A.C.S.) for HopeNet SA