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The Nazareth ManifestoÂ starts with Jesus in Nazareth, at the synagogue.Â [1]Â It is a place where he would have been deeply familiar to all the others attending, as the son of Joseph and Mary, with quite a lot of stories of his birth. He is by this time fully adult, a skilled craftsman, but also it appears something of a community leader because he is asked to read. He is well educated and one who teaches, hence sitting and speaking after the reading.

Jesusâ reading from Isaiah 61:1, sets out a vision of restoration, one which cuts through politics and Empires, powers and wars, and puts the intention of God in the driving seat of world affairs. As a servant song, the claim of its fulfilment is for some a call to arms, but to all a call to see that God is, in Jesus, completing his purpose. The almost apocalyptic passages of the latter chapters of Isaiah are not to be fulfilled through a Great War led by a Great King, but by the people of Nazarethâs next door neighbour.

It is an event almost as dramatic as the birth or crucifixion of Jesus because it points to a moment in which power shifts from bad to good, in which the cruelty and horror of the world begins a long but irresistible move towards the Kingdom of God. It finds echoes in John 1: the light is shining in the darkness and despite all its best efforts the darkness cannot overcome it.

The intention of Jesus, His purpose and vision, is not just a collection of nice words, but the heart of the ministry to which we are all called. The church is to proclaim freedom not serfdom, care for the poor not their exclusion, the release of captives not their extermination in concentration camps, as spoken of on Russian media in the last 24 hours.

The church is to proclaim, not enforce. We are to point to the story of God, to the work and life of Jesus. We cannot compel â although in history far too often we have tried â but we can testify.

That testimony is going to be more and more necessary. The last 15 years have seen crisis after crisis, huge earth shaking and history shaping events which have come one upon the other, not singly but in battalions.Â [2]

To name but a few affecting this country and the Anglican Communion: the world economic crisis of 2008-9 savaged confidence in materialism, but brought vast swathes of people into poverty in this country and abroad as it was followed by extreme austerity. The Arab spring overwhelmed systems of accepting refugees. Brexit exposed our deep divisions and lack of mutual understanding.

Covid touched all of us and killed about 175,000 and still brings us down, albeit with less threat. The cost of living crisis is leading to the biggest fall in real incomes after inflation since the Great Depression of 1929-32.

Now there is a war of great armies in Europe involving a nuclear power, a church in Russia divided by its approach to nationalism, and capable of spilling over wider and more ferociously in conflict with NATO.

All of these work themselves out in the day to day life of ministry. They are not just â to misquote Chamberlain â far away events of which we understand little, but shocks whose fall-out is felt in parish and chaplaincy, in our own lives and in the demands put on every disciple, and especially every church leader, of Jesus Christ who has heard and received the Nazareth Manifesto but who finds strength failing and tiredness demanding attention. We are starved of a little bit of boring normality.

To add to the externally imposed pressures, the diaboli ex machina, they have come upon a church already stressed. We feel the impact of the safeguarding failures. We know the impact of long-term decline in congregations and ageing demographics amongst those who faithfully serve. We are bullied by the culture which demands new responses. We struggle in a love-hate relationship with beautiful ancient buildings which are both spiritually âthin placesâ where God seems close but also are money sinks. We are divided over issues of identity, especially around gender, race and sexuality. The response to these internal issues requires effort, thought and time.

Time is at a premium with all the daily demands of paperwork, of funerals and pastoral care, of daily life. It is very hard indeed. I know that, and have been there. The work of the church is bigger with less people than at any time since 1945. The compassion continues, but as the heroic phase of each new crisis is replaced by the tiredness there is a danger of compassion fatigue. Those in this diocese do an extraordinary job, heroic and God-centred, Christ-glorifying and serving. Thank you a million times. Yet the crises keep coming and everything points to more, especially on issues of migration.

Yet we are clay jars, cracked, unable, and the realities of daily experience, and my and our own fallibility, often seem to overwhelm the great pictures of Godâs faithfulness which we hear. The institutional aspects of the Church often feel inhumane, mechanical and remorseless. That is true. However, Paul is writing to people like us, not to ideal people in an ideal world with ideal other Christians all around us.

At the heart of both readings, at the heart of what we believe, before all of us is not only the pattern but the empowering that comes from Jesus Christ, who reaches out collectively and individually to the whole church and all in it. Which is why at this service we can look to God for hope. So three short paragraphs about where we find renewed strength.

We do not lose heart: the Lord brings freedom (2 Cor. 4:1). Start with Christ. Christ gives the Holy Spirit and the Spirit gives freedom. In the time of reflection after this, set aside the guilt and the compulsions to do everything, let the Nazareth manifesto speak, and receive afresh the freedom of the Spirit to achieve and to attempt only those things that we are resourced for by the Spirit. Take permission from Godâs word not to imprison ourselves â I include myself â with the bars of the unachievable. In practice that looks like taking time for prayer, for retreat, for leisure, for friends and family. It is honesty and integrity and transparency. It is Godâs work to change the world, it is ours to proclaim the good news of what he is doing.

Centred on Christ, who shines in us, who shines through us, who opens Christ to us. Christ is our light and will reveal God to us and shine through us. We all know the faint feeling of surprise when we discover that someone we did not much for except to sit with, has found that we brought hope and determination in a grim time. It is because of the light of Christ. Do not try to make the light shine, but seek Christ first and it will â through Godâs action, not our work.

There is nothing surprising and it is not a sign of failure to struggle and suffer and even to fall short. Clay jars and suffering are part of the experience of carrying the cross of Christ. They do not mark our incompetence but our determination. We are to accept this reality and seek the encouragement and mutual support of other clay jars. Yet Christ through the Spirit is at work in us making Jesus visible in our clay mess, in our mortal flesh (2 Cor. 4:11).

These passages, our professions of faith whether baptism and confirmation, or ordination or consecration, call us to a wager on divine faithfulness. The wager is with all we are and have, the reward is the light of the life of Christ shining in and through the church. Our clay mess cannot quench the light anymore than the darkness of the crises that come from outside will overwhelm.

In this world and in eternity, the light of Christ shines in our lives and hearts and in our world and future.

God promises. We testify. The Spirit delivers.

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[1] Sam Wells, reprint 2015, wrote superbly on this passage in a book of this title.

[2] Hamlet Act IV Scene 5

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