



**LIVING GOD
RENEW AND
TRANSFORM US**

World Communion of Reformed Churches

Called to communion, committed to justice

General Council Bible Study

Luke 4:16-21

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This text is placed by Luke at the beginning of his Gospel. After Jesus' birth, genealogy and his temptation, this first thing Jesus does is teach at the synagogue in Nazareth. This sermon should be read as Jesus' mission statement. It provides an overview of Jesus life, work, and ministry. It points to Jesus' mandate. His mission is broken into five goals:

1. Bring good news to the poor
2. Proclaim release to the captives
3. Proclaim recovery of sight to the blind
4. Let the oppressed go free
5. Proclaim the year of Jubilee

This mission statement is highly political. There is nothing here about the salvation of the souls, but it's all about liberation. The target group of Jesus' ministry are not the souls, but the oppressed. Luke, in comparison to Mathew, is not interested in the poor in spirit, but in those made poor by unjust economic systems. Jesus here is not so much concerned by those captive by "sin" but those jailed by the empire.

Are we made blind that we can't see anymore what the text is saying? If we have doubt then let's look at Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1, which is a kind of a prelude to Luke 4. In Luke 4 people wonder if Jesus was no other than Joseph's son, but Luke 4 make it clear that Jesus is Mary's son, and they have the same theology with a preferential option for the poor. If we have doubt, let's look at Jesus' sermon on the field in Luke 6 to see that Jesus is interested in the poor and the hungry.

To understand Jesus' mission we have to understand his context. Jesus was born in Palestine under occupation, Roman occupation. Palestine has been an occupied country for most of the last 3000 years. It started with the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, then the Persians, then came the Greeks and then the Romans. Jesus' mission statement is a combination of words spoken by Trito-Isaiah (61:1-2 and 58:6) and Deutro-Isaiah (42:7). At the time of Deutro-Isaiah Palestine was occupied by the Babylonians. Although the Babylonians were not anymore at the time of Trito-Isaiah, the Persians were in control. These words were spoken in the context of empire. Jesus knew exactly what to quote from the Hebrew Bible, when and why. *Der Sitz im Leben* of those texts is the occupation. This is why they have to be read and understood in this context.

Occupation is almost a synonym for Palestine. The Romans weren't the last empire who occupied our country. We had the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Crusaders, the Ottomans, the British and now the Israeli occupation.

I was five years old when Israel occupied Bethlehem in 1967. This was exactly fifty years ago. I know what living under occupation means, I can imagine what it meant for Jesus to be born under occupation, to live his entire life under occupation and to be crushed on the cross by the empire. There is no way to understand Jesus' mission without looking at the context of imperial occupation.

Occupied people are not poor, per se, but are made poor. Their resources are exploited by the empire, and they are made to cheap labour to keep the economy of the empire running and growing. The cost of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land is around 10 billion dollars, representing almost 80% of the GDP. The total economic aid that we get doesn't even compensate for a small portion of what the occupation is costing us. Occupied people are not poor, they are made poor. Jesus understood that. This is why he is not promising them aid or food but good news of social justice.

Those captives Jesus is addressing are not those captives in sin. The text is very clear. These are captives of the empire. These are political prisoners who dare to resist the empire. They are put into prison so that they don't disrupt the empire, so that business in the empire can continue as usual. Since 1967 over 700,000 Palestinians have been put in Israeli jails. This is almost one fifth of the Palestinian people in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Currently, over 6000 Palestinian political prisoners are in Israeli jails awaiting for someone to proclaim their freedom and set them free.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Balfour declaration. It wasn't the Lord God that promised Israel Palestine, but Lord Balfour. This was part of a British imperial, colonial plan. But this year marks also the 50th anniversary of the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Churches are calling for a year of Jubilee, for Israel to end its occupation and to give the land back to its original owners. We have to read the mission statement of Jesus in such a political context.

Jesus' mission statement is highly political. But Jesus' mission is holistic. This is why we see Jesus opting for the sinners and outcast of his time. Occupied people often blame themselves for their occupation. They see this is a punishment from God for not observing the law. So more religious laws are produced to keep people in line. Occupied people in this case become doubly oppressed. They are oppressed by the political laws of the empire but also by religious laws introduced by the religious establishment. Freedom from religious oppression is an integral part of Jesus' mission and an integral part of the reformation.

Understanding Jesus' mission in his context might be threatening for some people who got used to spiritualizing Jesus ministry. But this understanding poses a challenge as well to us. If we are to understand Jesus' mission as highly political, then we need to ask the question, if Jesus was able to achieve the five goals he set for himself, did he accomplish his mission? If his mission is understood spiritually, it is easier to claim that it was fulfilled. But what if his mission is political? Don't we need to admit that Jesus failed in his mission? Imperial oppression is still not only in Palestine but throughout the world in an unprecedented magnitude.

I believe that Jesus' mission is not accomplished yet. What was accomplished is the proclamation. Jesus proclaimed God's vision for this world in very clear terms, and it is highly political. But Jesus didn't claim that he is the one that will do all of that. He proclaims God's intention and plan. But like in any other plan, God needs resources to accomplish his plan. He needs human resources and with his mission statement he hopes to invite us and to motivate us to join his team, to join his mission and to become his agents of change.

Jesus' sermon was in no way an illusion, wishful thinking or a kind of hallucination. Jesus' sermon was the unfolding of a new vision for social and political transformation. As Christians we continue to live in a broken world and thus the tension between the "the world as it is" with all its ugly and painful realities and the "the world as it could be." We have to balance that tension. Being too absorbed by "the world as it is" makes us resentful. Dreaming too much about "the world as it should be" makes us fundamentalists. We can't live but with our two feet deeply grounded in the reality of this world, and, at the same time, with our two hands engaged in creating the "the world as it could be." We have to learn to hold the reins of tension between history with its endless wounds and the future with its promises without forgetting that the present is the space to heal wounds and to seize opportunities. We need to analyze the oppressive system of empire, without falling into a kind of fatalism where we become objects of history. To some extent, we lose the future the moment we lose our capability for imagination. Jesus' sermon is an open invitation to envision a new world as God intended it. Without a new driving vision and without allowing for such an imaginative process to take place, the world will spiral into chaos. Without vision, nations go astray. It is in this time of immense challenges that imaginative faith rises to discover the endless possibilities that lie therein.

Imagination is important, but imagination alone is not enough. God's preferential option for the poor is good, but it is not enough. Faith is about imagination, but it is more about hope. Imagination is what we see. Hope is what we do. Imagination can be highly deceiving if it is not connected to a well-defined strategy and a plan. Hope is the power to keep focusing on the larger vision while taking and doing the small steps towards that future. Hope doesn't wait for vision to come. Hope is vision in action today. Faith that makes people passive, depressive, or illusive is not faith, but opium. Faith is facing the empire with open eyes that analyzes what is happening while, at the same time, develops the ability to see beyond what humans see. Hope is living the reality and yet investing in a different one. Jesus' plan has to be implemented "today" in our lives, in our churches and in our world. Jesus' sermon can't be something from "yesterday." It is always a call for us today to engage in God's mission. Just as *ekklesia semper reformanda*, so we have to keep translating Jesus' sermon into our world of today, in the context of the empire of today, with a new vision for the world of today.

This is our call. It is a costly call. This is why the people, after hearing his sermon, felt threatened and wanted to get rid of him. Everyone who dares to challenge the empire experiences what Jesus experienced. The time of Jesus is not different than our time. It is much easier to spiritualize Christianity so that it loses its teeth. Then we don't need to do much, but to conform ourselves to the empire. Jesus' sermon is an open invitation for a costly life that is committed to social, political and religious transformation in the face of empire today.