

**9 May 2021**

## **West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood**

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Reading: Luke 4:14-21

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I'm sure, like me, most of you are also missing going to a busy church every Sunday, without wearing masks, singing our hearts out, and sharing in fellowship with a cuppa and a biscuit in our hands after worship... It's been a long hard year.

But one of the good things that came out of lockdown, is the fact that technology made it possible for us to watch church services from home. Which meant that a few weeks ago, I could watch how someone I know, called Yolande Kruger, was inducted as a minister in a congregation in South Africa.

That wouldn't have been possible before lockdown. And I am so thankful that I was able to share in that service, all the way from here, because the words she said in her very first sermon touched me so much, that I decided that I simply HAVE to share it with you!

Yolande didn't know that I was watching the service. We stayed in the Halls together while we were at Uni, but to be honest, I've not had contact with her for many years. She most probably doesn't even know that we live in Scotland now. And it's just by chance that I came across her induction service and decided to watch it – but then, does anything ever really happen by chance? *I don't think so...*

So let's start at the beginning. The context for our reading is as follows: Jesus has been baptised by John, he spent 40 days in the desert where he was tempted by the devil, and now he was on his way back home, to the place he was brought up in: Nazareth.

On the Sabbath day, he went to the Synagogue, as was the custom. There he stood up to read from the Scriptures, and delivered *his* very first sermon.

The passage he read was a prophecy from the book Isaiah, and then, in his sermon, he did a very brave thing: he told the people he grew up in front of, that in HIM those prophetic words have been fulfilled.

He said that HE was the one sent by God to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

I can just imagine how these words must have touched the people listening to him, because they *were* poor – all the land belonged to the Roman Authorities and they had to work as day labourers, hardly earning enough to take care of their families.

They were longing for the custom of celebrating the Year of the Lord's favour, as known in the time of Isaiah, when the people were also struggling after returning home from the exile.

Every 50 years the trumpets would sound joyfully to announce the year of the Lords' favour, a year during which families who lost their land

would get it back, all debt would be erased, and slaves would be set free.

This is what God wanted for his people. Everybody was the same in his eyes, and every 50 years this had to be set straight amongst the people themselves too.

The year of the Lord's favour was the only way in which the people could be rescued from the vicious circle of suffering and struggling they could get caught up in so very easily. It was a fresh start. It gave them hope.

And now Jesus is saying that in him the year of the Lord's favour has arrived: He is bringing grace, recovery, and hope. A new lease on life.

This of course was meant physically and spiritually. Jesus was going to set them free from everything that was binding them, from all kinds of suffering, including the suffering of the soul.

Jesus' ministry was a ministry of action. His aim was to bring people back on their feet, and to reset their focus on what was truly important.

Let's stop here for a minute and reflect on our own situation... We've had a hard year. It's easy to identify with those who suffered in Biblical times, those who didn't know how to handle their situations.

So many people want to know what Christianity's answer to the Covid-19 pandemic is...

Maybe we should try to take a leaf from the Early Christian's book before we try to formulate answers.

In Acts 11 the disciples hear about an impending famine. What is their reaction to this?

They don't ask: "Now what can this mean? Is God maybe angry at us?"  
(Like we so much like to do.)

No, they ask:

- "Who will be affected the most by this?"
- What can we do to help?
- Who can we send?"

Straight away they looked for a practical solution to the problem, instead of philosophically debating the meaning of it all.

Maybe that is because Jesus' ministry was still fresh in their minds. Maybe they remembered that Jesus taught them that it was their responsibility to make hope break through for others.

It was part of the essence of the early church to bring the 'year of the Lord's favour' to others.

I would like to tell you a story of something that happened in the more recent history of Christianity:

Shortly before the start of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, a wee boy lived in Hamburg, Germany. He was brought up in a loving, intellectual

environment, but like so many others in Europe after the 1<sup>st</sup> World War, his parents were openly hostile against the church and religion.

So this wee boy grows up without faith.

At age 14 he is forced to join Hitler's youth movement alongside all the young boys of his town.

At age 16, the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War was raging, and he gets called up for active service.

At age 17 he survives a British air raid on Hamburg, and he witnesses the brutal death of his school friend. In desperation he calls out to the God he doesn't know, but there is no answer...

For the next 2 years he is an unwilling soldier, until the war ends. But this was not the end of his suffering, because at age 19 he becomes a Prisoner of War for 3 years. He spent time in 3 different camps: In Belgium, Scotland, and England.

In the first camp, in Belgium, fenced in with no hope for the future or freedom, he experienced what he thought was the lowest point of his life, calling it the 'darkest night of the soul'.

Then he was moved to Scotland. And although he didn't think it possible, he felt even worse here, because for the 1<sup>st</sup> time the impact of the war crimes imposed on others by Germany, became clear to him, and it filled him with guilt and shame. He said that cold despair laid an iron ring around his heart, it took away the air he needed to breathe...

Now he was at the lowest low of his life...

But let's take a look at his life 75 years later. He is still alive today, and he is 95 years old.

He wrote more than 45 theology books, most of them with the theme of hope. In actual fact, he is known as "the theologian of hope".

I'm talking about Professor Jurgen Moltmann, one of the most influential theologians of our time – well-known all over the world.

Now you might wonder: how is that even possible? What happened? What turned his life around so dramatically?

In his autobiography he says that God changed his heart over a long time, but 3 events stand out:

- In the camp in Belgium, he was doing hard labour. One day, he was pushing a wheelbarrow, and as he looked up, he was standing right in front of a cherry blossom tree in full bloom. The shock of finding so much beauty, amongst all the chaos, made him feel faint. And for the first time in many years, something stirred in his heart.
- One day a minister in one of the camps gave him a Bible. He says that on that day he would have much preferred a packet of cigarettes! He read the Bible without understanding much, but he kept going back to Psalm 39. Something in those words resonated with him, he felt as if someone understood his loneliness and despair.

- And 3rdly there was the kindness of the Scottish people. Despite the fact that the German soldiers were the enemy, the Scottish people treated them with dignity. They made wooden toys in the camps, and the families from the area would come buy these for their children. And on one such occasion, he was unwell and had a runny nose. An older Scottish lady saw this, went back home and brought him a brand-new handkerchief.

And this small act of kindness, was one of the things that brought his heart back to life.

That life and faith has never left his heart since. He believes that here in Scotland, in that camp, God brought his soul the “year of the favour of the Lord”.

*And this is why Yolande’s reference to Moltmann’s life story touched me so much. I knew his story, but didn’t remember that it was in SCOTLAND that he was shown kindness, probably because it was long before Scotland became part of my life story that I learnt about his! And from personal experience I can testify to the kindness of the Scottish people...*

In the English camp he got to go to the library and the church, and he could finish his school career. And that is where he decided to become a minister.

And the rest, as they say, is history!

God used nature, his Word, and the love of people, to change Moltmann's life.

And this story is a reminder to all of us that we can also make hope break through for other people.

When asked how she knows who needs help, a famous street pastor said: by walking slowly. You won't notice need if you walk fast.

After Jesus' sermon in the synagogue that day, he taught his disciples to walk slowly. Because if you walk slowly, you can get involved, and bring hope.

Let's do that too. Let's walk slowly. This year of suffering brought all our busy lives to a halt. Let's keep walking slowly and notice if someone needs help to get back on their feet again.

Let's not always look for answers, but rather for practical solutions. Let's bring God's grace and hope to all those around us, in a tangible way.

God is always with us. Even in places and times we don't expect to find him... He was there with his 1<sup>st</sup> disciples, he was there in the war camps, he is here with us now.

In Jesus, God himself brought the year of his favour. Let's allow him to use us to keep spreading this hope. Let's be the person who gives someone with a runny nose a handkerchief. Bringing hope is as simple as that... And people need it now more than ever.

Amen