

The Nazareth Manifesto ...

... a vision for the Minster

A sermon given on the Third Sunday of Epiphany, 26th January 2025, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Luke 2:41-eNehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-21

Well, this week, we've seen the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 47th President of the United States. He began his term with a flurry of executive orders: declaring a state of emergency on the Mexican border; terminating quite a number of government posts, particularly around equality, inclusion, and diversity; and cancelling all of his predecessor, Joe Biden's executive orders; and a whole range of other things as well. Sometimes folks say that words don't matter. Sometimes people say that words are just words. But actually, some words are quite important. Some words really do change things: at a wedding, when a couple say, 'I will'; or in a courtroom, when a jury say, 'not guilty'; in a job when an employee says, 'I resign' - these are words that make a big difference. But what about the words of a vision? A week or so back, the PCC looked at a new version of our vision strategy called Minster 28 and we started to circulate it last Sunday. (If you weren't here to pick up a copy, then there's a whole stack at the high gate entrance. Do please pick one up at the end and take it home and have a look at it.)

It's easy to dismiss something like this as just a bunch of words. It's true that some documents of this nature are so vague and high-sounding that they don't make any difference. But what a good vision does is it provides a narrative - it tells a story that helps us to see where we're going, because whether we like it or not, every church and every individual is going somewhere - the only question is whether we know where we're heading or whether we're content to be blown this way and that by every unconscious influence that has shaped our life without us even noticing.

Our Bible readings this morning describe people drawing on words from the past in order to embrace a clear vision for the future. In our Old Testament reading, the Jewish people had just returned to Jerusalem after 70 years of exile in Babylon and they found the city in ruins surrounded by hostile tribes, and they weren't sure who they were or what they should be doing. So Nehemiah, the governor, began a programme of rebuilding and they rebuilt the city wall. Then we have this extraordinary scene described to us this morning, where Ezra the scribe gathers all the people together and reads to them from the Book of the Law, probably the Book of Deuteronomy and they clearly had not heard it before. It makes a deep impression on them, reminding them that they are the covenant people of God, different from other nations. It reminds them of the ancient festivals, which in turn are reminders of how God had saved them in the past. It reminds them of the law of the Lord, which they had forgotten. And so the people swear to keep the commandments and observe the festivals and to rediscover their true identity as the people of God. And so these ancient words of the law shape the lives of the people and give them a better vision of how they can live and of what people they can be.

In our gospel reading, we saw Jesus doing something similar. At the very start of his ministry, just after his baptism, he draws inspiration from an ancient prophecy from the Prophet Isaiah - it was already 500 years old when Jesus quoted it, *"The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives*

and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." And that, in a nutshell, is what Jesus is all about: that sets out his agenda clearly at the start of his ministry. Scholars sometimes call it the Nazareth Manifesto, because it reads like a manifesto, a vision strategy. But what makes this vision different from any other is that in the very act of announcing it, Jesus says, *"Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* I wonder what you make of that. I wish I could wave a copy of Minister 28 and say, "Today this vision has been fulfilled in your hearing." Wouldn't that be wonderful? But what does Jesus mean? My guess is that change in a church happens when we focus not so much on the programme, but on the person who embodies it and that as we pay attention to Jesus himself and model our lives on his, so as a natural consequence, good news is shared with the poor, whoever they may be; freedom is announced to those who are trapped, whatever their cage might look like; recovery of sight is announced to the blind, whatever it is they fail see or to understand; liberation comes to those who are oppressed, whatever the nature of the injustice or the unfairness they face; and a new beginning comes to those who have become burdened by the past.

So our Minister 28 vision has as its headline, 'Becoming more like Christ' because everything depends on that. Many of the more specific initiatives outlined in this document are designed to help us to grow more into the likeness of Christ, not least in our concern for the marginalised and for those outside the church who need to hear of the loving purposes of God.

This coming week, we have a programme of events to encourage prayer for Minister 28, prayer that we may become more like Christ, and pray that we may grow in our understanding of what that might look like in our particular context. I want to invite everybody to join in with that as you're able. There's a programme of the events in the notice sheet, or just join in with this at home. But please read this draft vision strategy; pray about it; talk about it; and let us know what you think. It is only a draft. What are the bits that seem to you to be most important that should come at the front of the queue? Or what are the things that we've missed out that you think are vital? Is there anything in it that's just wrong-headed? So this is your chance to respond and to help shape it under God.

People need a vision, as they did in the days of Nehemiah; people need to know what Beverley Minister is about, as they could see what Jesus was about from the Nazareth Manifesto; people need to know what they can do to respond to the grace of God who speaks to us afresh in every generation and who reveals his son that we might become more like him. So read [these words](#), pray about them, and reflect upon how you can be a part of this and of how you can respond to the word of God.

[The Vision strategy can be found here:

<https://beverleyminster.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Minster-28-Draft-Vision-Strategy-14.2.25-002.pdf>

Reading Texts

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

¹ All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. ² Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. ³ He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶ Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen', lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. ⁸ So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. ⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.' For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, 'Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.'

Luke 4:14-21

¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸ 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' ²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'