

I wonder if any of you remember the *Buku Harapan* from the 2018 Malaysian General Election. That, of course, was the manifesto of the Pakatan Harapan coalition! It had 28,000 words, was 194 pages long, and presented 60 promises in total, including 10 signature promises to be delivered within the first 100 days in power, if they won, which they did. It also turned out to be impossible to fulfil!<sup>1</sup> But one thing they at least did was to raise the bar, so that by the 2022 election, all 3 coalitions actually put in some effort to come up with substantial manifestos.

Now you might ask, is there any point to having a manifesto in the first place? Well, manifestos can, at the very least, give an indication of what someone stands for. It helps us identify what goals, priorities and plans they have in mind. They offer a direction, as well as accountability, since you can see whether those promises are being kept or not.

Well, in today's passage, we're going to get, in effect, **the manifesto of Jesus**. And Jesus is going to tell us what he stands for, what his plans and priorities are, which direction he's going in. And I think that can be wonderfully clarifying. You see, as God's church, we want to partner with God in his redemptive mission to the world. But here's the question. What exactly is that redemptive mission? Is it to get involved in poverty alleviation? Is it to commit to improving rural

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2022-113-malaysias-ge-15-manifestos-wading-through-a-flood-of-offerings-by-lee-hwok-aun/>

education? Is it to fight human trafficking? What is his manifesto, and how does that impact us today? Well, let's take a closer look this morning. And we're going to think about three aspects in particular. First, we're going to look at **this manifesto's contents**, in Luke 4:14-21. This is where we'll spend the majority of our time today. Then second, we're going to look at **this manifesto's reception**, in verses 22-30. And finally, we're look at **this manifesto's viability**, in verses 31-44. So do make sure your Bibles are open in front of you, if you've closed them, and let's allow God's Word to shape our perspective.

**So firstly, let's look at this manifesto's contents.** Verse 15 tells us that for the first time in Luke's Gospel, Jesus is exercising a public ministry, teaching around the place. But it would be weird, wouldn't it, if we just watched him do loads of stuff for the next few chapters, without knowing what his agenda is?<sup>2</sup> And so Luke homes in on one episode in particular – the day when he goes back to his hometown in Galilee<sup>3</sup> – so that we'll know what Jesus is really all about.

Now in many ways, the scene looks perfectly ordinary. It's not a special season – it's not Pentecost time, or time for the Feast of Tabernacles, or any other festive time. It's just an ordinary Sabbath Day! And when Jesus enters his home synagogue, verse 16, he's simply doing something he's done countless times before. The uncles

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<sup>2</sup> Perrin, *Tyndale*, 'Context' in "Ministry in Galilee" (4:14-9:50)

<sup>3</sup> See 1:26, 2:4 and 2:51.

and aunties who would have watched him grow up likely would have greeted him as they took their seats on the benches, saying things like “Oh, you’re back again?! How nice! How’s your mum, by the way?”

But what follows next is anything but ordinary. Luke makes that clear to us, by deliberately slowing down the action in the next few verses so we can take in what’s happening. And so from the moment Jesus stands up, the camera zooms in. He takes the scroll of Isaiah from an usher. He unrolls it. His finger moves down the parchment until he gets to the exact spot of his chosen passage. And if we’ve been paying attention to Luke so far, we might subconsciously begin holding our breath. After all, Luke has just told us, verse 14, that Jesus comes “in the power of the Spirit”! Last week, He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil, whom he overcame by his mastery of the Word. And now, he is empowered by that same Spirit, at the beginning of his public ministry, to speak forth God’s Word again. Jesus, you see, is going to lay out his manifesto, though the audience doesn’t know it yet. And so he begins reading Isaiah 61.

““The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,

to set the oppressed free,  
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

Now so far, it's all still looking pretty ordinary! This wouldn't be the first time Isaiah 61 would have been read in a synagogue. But perhaps there was something about the way Jesus read, that captured the hearts and imagination of everyone gathered there. For as we read verse 20, we can't help but sense the anticipation. There was no slouching or yawning. Everyone's eyes are fixed on this hometown boy! And the anticipation only grows as he rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the attendant and sits back down. That, by the way, indicates he's about to preach. To preach to you today, I would stand, but back then in the synagogue, it was the reverse. Those who gave the sermon sat.<sup>4</sup> And that moment between verses 20 and 21 feels like an absolute cliffhanger.<sup>5</sup> What will come out of Jesus' mouth?

Whatever the people were expecting, I'm pretty sure they weren't expecting verse 21! "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." WOW! That's pretty explosive! I mean, perhaps the congregation were hoping for, expecting even, an uplifting prophecy. Perhaps they were hoping to be comforted by being reminded of God's promises – that one day their fortunes as an oppressed people would be reversed. But Jesus sits down, and blows their expectations out of the water

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<sup>4</sup> Edwards, *Pillar*, 135. Most of the stuff about the synagogue in the preceding paragraphs are also derived from here.

<sup>5</sup> <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2022-01-17/luke-414-21-3/>

with just one sentence. He declares to them: your future hope has just become your present reality. Why? Because *I'm* here.

Can you feel the force of what Jesus is saying? Perhaps not, if we're not familiar with Isaiah. So let's backtrack a little, and get to know Isaiah a little better. Who is Isaiah? Well, he's an Israelite prophet. He's a spokesman for the LORD. And he's speaking to a people, who have tasted the goodness of the Lord as they were liberated from slavery in Egypt. He's speaking to those who have enjoyed the prosperity of the Promised Land, but who have also known the bitter taste of being sent into captivity and exile under various foreign regimes. He's speaking to a people, who have experienced Isaiah 59:9-10:

... justice is far from us,  
and righteousness does not reach us.  
We look for light, but all is darkness;  
for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows.  
<sup>10</sup> Like the blind we grope along the wall,  
feeling our way like people without eyes.  
At midday we stumble as if it were twilight;  
among the strong, we are like the dead.

But Isaiah speaks not as a messenger of despair, but a messenger of hope. Because over and over again, in the second half of his book, he

keeps talking about an individual, whom he calls the Servant. This Servant, Isaiah says in chapter 42, will have the special anointing of the Spirit! He will open the eyes that are blind. He will bring prisoners out of the dungeon.<sup>6</sup> He'll be a light to everyone. And Isaiah keeps saying this again and again, not just in Isaiah 42 but 48 and 49 and yes, here in Isaiah 61. This Servant will bring about a glorious restoration. And now Jesus says: He has been sent as that anointed, Spirit-filled Servant. You see, at the heart of his manifesto is not simply a list of dos and don'ts, a series of policies and programmes. At the heart of Jesus' manifesto is a **person**. It's himself. You want direction? You want to know what to do? Look no further than Jesus himself. For verses 18 and 19 tell us, Jesus is good news to the poor. He's going to make sure the light is switched on and all blindness is gone. His ministry is going to be a ministry of **freedom**. That's the manifesto. That's the good news.

But wait a minute, you might say. When I read on in Luke's Gospel, I only find Jesus giving a blind man sight once, later on in Luke 18. That's not many at all! And I never find Jesus setting literal prisoners free. In fact, his own cousin, John the Baptist will die in prison! So is this manifesto just a bunch of hot air? Good question! That should drive us to examine these words of verses 18-19 afresh, to see if we've missed something. So what's the best way to do this? Well, let's think a little more about who the poor, the prisoners and the

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<sup>6</sup> Eg. 42:7.

blind actually are. Given that Isaiah forms the basis of Jesus' manifesto, the best thing to do is to figure out who Isaiah, and the Old Testament more generally, are referring to, when they talk about the poor, the prisoners and the blind.

So who are the poor? The Hebrew word translated "poor" in Isaiah 61 doesn't merely label those with dire financial or material prospects, though it surely includes them. Rather, it refers more broadly to the afflicted, the helpless, the outcast, those who are in trouble, those who know they have nowhere to turn to but God himself.<sup>7</sup> That's why in our English Bibles, that word is also sometimes translated not as "poor", but as "humble", or "meek", or "afflicted".<sup>8</sup> In the context of Isaiah 61, it would primarily refer to those afflicted by the Babylonians, as a result of their own sin.<sup>9</sup> These are the poor. Similarly, the prisoners or captives in the Old Testament usually meant the exiled, which had spiritual overtones, since again, the exile was viewed as a consequence of sin.<sup>10</sup> And the exile forms the background for Isaiah 61! And this week, when I looked through the second half of Isaiah, I realised every time blindness is mentioned, it exclusively refers to spiritual blindness.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 3:14; 49:13, 51:21, 54:11. See also the Logos word search I performed on this word *anawim*, and Thompson, EGGNT, on 4:18. See also Oswalt, NICOT (Isaiah 40-66), 565.

<sup>8</sup> Eg. Psalm 10:17, 37:11, Isaiah 29:19, 32:7.

<sup>9</sup> Riffing off RML Luke, 87.

<sup>10</sup> Bock, 409. See also Isaiah 49:9, where it parallels those in darkness and comes in the context of the day of favour and salvation (49:8).

<sup>11</sup> 42:7, 16, 18-19; 43:8, 44:9, 56:10, 59:10.

So these are the people Jesus has come for. People who know they are completely helpless, who know they cannot see spiritually, who know they are needy for God's salvation! Read on in Luke's Gospel, and again and again, we'll notice these are precisely the kind of people who come to Jesus! Without a doubt, many of them are on the bottom rung of society. Many of them are materially poor! They're people without power, without influence, without much at all. Because such people are those who are usually most aware they need mercy, they need help, they need to depend on something outside themselves.<sup>12</sup> And Jesus clearly has compassion for the literally poor and oppressed! But they also include people like Levi in Luke 5 and Zacchaeus in Luke 19, both rich tax collectors, both of whom are associated with the oppressors, who nonetheless know they need something beyond material wealth. When they meet Jesus, they know they need him.

And so Jesus' manifesto is not just another social programme. It might look like it at first glance, and indeed some Christians use Luke 4:18-19 to justify certain socio-political agendas. But the good news isn't that Jesus has come for just a certain segment of society. He's come for all those who look like they are beyond the reach of God's favour!<sup>13</sup> He has come to bring freedom to such people. That's his emphasis! Perhaps a couple of you might have noticed that while the middle part of verse 18 "he has sent me to proclaim freedom for the

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<sup>12</sup> See also Thompson, EGGNT, on 4:18, where he goes through instances of the poor etc. in Luke itself.

<sup>13</sup> McKinley, *Luke 1-12*, 54.



prisoners” is from Isaiah 61, the last part of verse 18, “to set the oppressed free” wasn’t in the original quotation! Where does it come from? Well, it seems as if Jesus mixed in Isaiah 58:6 in there. Why? Because in both Isaiah 58 and 61, the word “freedom” or “release” is used! So it seems Jesus wants to make clear this is going to be characteristic of his ministry.<sup>14</sup> And you know what else is significant about that word “freedom” or “release”? It’s exactly the same Greek word for forgiveness, used back by Zechariah and John in Luke 1:77 and 3:3!<sup>15</sup> Jesus will release us from slavery to sin and Satan! He will usher in the year of God’s favour. In the Old Testament, we learn about the year of Jubilee, also known as the year of release.<sup>16</sup> It’s a time where debts are paid, there’s social reintegration, a time where the world is being reset and put back to equilibrium, as it were. And Jesus says, the dawn of the true Jubilee Year is coming, because he’s here! God is here, he’s cleaning up our mess, he’s reigning, He’s in charge. His is a ministry of freedom, as he brings in his kingdom.

But notice how Jesus will achieve his manifesto. Let me point it out for you. Look carefully again at verse 18. What has the Spirit anointed Jesus to do? Answer: to *proclaim* good news! Or the next line, what has the Spirit sent Jesus for? Once again, to *proclaim* freedom for the prisoners! Or verse 19. What will Jesus be doing? *Proclaiming* the year of the Lord’s favour! Do you see what his

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<sup>14</sup> Green, NICNT, 210.

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<sup>16</sup> See Garland, ZECNT, 199-200.

ministry is going to be? It's one where preaching and teaching will be paramount! His ministry is a ministry of **proclamation!** That's how his kingdom is going to advance. It's all over this passage, isn't it? In Luke 4:15, we're told he's teaching, and verses 18-30 we actually hear his preaching. In verses 31-44 later on, we're going to see Jesus healing and performing miracles, but notice the occasion for those miracles in verses 31 and 32. It is still teaching! And right at the end of verses 43-44, what does he say he must do? He must proclaim! He must preach! This is Jesus' priority. This is how Jesus sees his mission being carried out. This forms a significant part of his manifesto. Jesus has come, not to perform a few magic tricks here and there, but to preach.

Now we've covered quite a bit of ground already, so let's just pause here and reflect on what we've heard so far. If these are the contents of Jesus' manifesto, what does it mean for us today? Well, let me suggest two things to take away here. *Firstly, we need to recognise that apart from Jesus, we too are poor and captive and blind and oppressed.* Do we see ourselves in those terms? Because Jesus does. That might be a shock to the system. After all, it's much nicer to think of ourselves as self-sufficient, as enlightened, as resourceful. But are we truly free? Let's think about it. Could there a bad habit that try as you might, you simply can't break free? Is there some sin that still torments you, even after all these years?<sup>17</sup> Do you find yourself more

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<sup>17</sup> I owe this line of application to Christopher Ash.

of a slave to the approval of others than you care to admit? Do you wish to live up to a certain standard, whether it's your own, your parents, or society's, and find you just can't? How free are we really? // And how rich are we really? We think of wealth, of course, in terms of our assets, but the New Testament sometimes gets us thinking about wealth in different categories. It encourages us: be rich in good works! Be rich in the fruit of the Spirit. Be rich in acts of kindness and gentleness and patience. So the question we ask ourselves then will be: is that me? Am I rich? Or am I actually poorer than I realise? Do I see, or am I actually blinder than I realise? I might be well-educated, but can I actually see where God is working, and who God is working in?

Well, Jesus invites us to see ourselves in those terms. And he says if you do, then you'll get to meet me. Because, he says: I've come for the poor, the prisoners, the blind, the oppressed. Jesus comes for all those who are humble enough to say "I need you, Jesus". Without you, I am a wretched person. I am pitiful. I can't even see. And the good news is: Jesus says, I've come to release you. But only if you admit you need me in the first place.

So that's one thing to take away. But *secondly, understand that the advancement of Jesus' manifesto cannot neglect proclamation*. Now let me be clear. We're called to love people. It's part of being a follower of Jesus! Two Sundays ago we saw that responding to Jesus

in repentance included being generous to and honest with others! And all throughout the centuries, it's been great to see Christians take the lead when it comes to fighting slavery and human trafficking and poverty and to lift up the standards of education and all of that! The ancient theologian Basil the Great founded a hospital with a ward set aside for the care of lepers. John Chrysostom, widely regarded as the best preacher of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, made sure funding went to charitable institutions!<sup>18</sup> And it is good news when Christians work together to set someone oppressed in Ukraine or North Korea today free!

But that mustn't obscure the fact that true freedom, true sight, true rescue can only finally and ultimately come in Jesus. For isn't it wonderful when a North Korean Christian can say: I may be destitute, I may be oppressed, and I may not be able to escape my circumstances in this life – though I pray for that everyday – but I know who I am. I'm a child of God. I have an eternal inheritance that can never be taken away. I will one day see Jesus face to face. And that is guaranteed! Is that not freeing? And so Jesus must be proclaimed. It's part of his manifesto. And it must be in our church's manifesto too. If our church only gave food parcels to the poor, only put on skits and concerts in the name of charity, only talked about political reform, but never, ever proclaimed the person of Jesus – that he died and rose again to pay for my sin and is now reigning as the King of God's kingdom, we would have completely deviated from the

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<sup>18</sup> Glen Scrivener, *The Air we breathe*, 73-74.

reason why Jesus came. So Luke asks us: will we receive Jesus' agenda as it comes to us? Or will we impose our own agenda?

Well, that brings us to the **second thing we want to look at today: the manifesto's reception.** Now, don't forget, Jesus is in his hometown! And how do the home crowd take what he says? Well, at first all looks good! Verse 22. "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips." They were impressed!<sup>19</sup> They said to each other: "Good sermon! I liked it!" But as any veteran preacher knows – people can mean different things when they say they like a sermon! Often, people just mean they liked the eloquence of the preacher. They liked how the sermon was presented. They liked *how* it was said, rather than *what* was said. In fact, they might not actually really believe what was said!

And this is reflected in their subsequent question. "Is this not Joseph's son?" they asked. You see, the crowd cannot get beyond their pre-conceptions about Jesus! Isn't he our local boy? Isn't he the one we watched grow up in our synagogue? So we have certain ideas about him, and they certainly don't involve Isaiah 61! And so implied in their question is this indirect rebuke. "Know your place, son! Don't start getting big ideas about yourself! You have to act on our terms!"

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<sup>19</sup> RML Luke takes the minority view that the people were testifying against him (the dative can be one of advantage or disadvantage), but all the major English translations and most commentators take the +ve view. I follow the majority view, since I think it can still work, as this paragraph shows.

And Jesus gets that. He knows they liked his eloquence, but he senses they don't follow him otherwise! And so he responds directly. He brings to the surface their skepticism, verse 23. No doubt you would say to me: "Physician, heal yourself!" He says. In other words, Jesus says, no doubt you're thinking: Prove yourself!<sup>20</sup> We heard you did some amazing things elsewhere! So if you can do that in Capernaum, why not do it in your hometown? Go on now!

But Jesus says: let me reveal your true colours. To do that, he references what happened in the days of the two great prophets of the Old Testament, Elijah and Elisha, in verses 24-27. Notice, he says, where Elijah was sent, in the days of great famine. He wasn't sent to any Jewish king, but to a Gentile widow far outside the land, a woman who was so desperate she was waiting to die. Likewise, Elisha was sent to heal just one solitary leper, and guess what? That leper just happened to be the commander of one of Israel's most hated enemies, Syria.<sup>21</sup> You see, this is what Jesus is saying. God's grace is for everyone. The foreigners. The outsiders. And yes, even the enemies. But you don't like that. You're just like Israel in the days of Elijah and Elisha. They rejected the prophets, because they didn't like what they said. And now you're rejecting me, because you don't like what I said.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Garland, ZECNT, has an interesting alternative reading, but in the end, I followed the more conventional reading, a la Bock.

<sup>21</sup> Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 47.

<sup>22</sup> McKinley, 56, helpfully summarises the point of these verses.

Well, you can imagine how that went down, can't you? In fact, you don't have to imagine. You just have to read verses 28-29! The crowds are furious, and instantly turn into a mob. Don't miss how mad they are, verse 29. They want to throw him off a cliff! They want to kill him! You see, when we truly grasp the gospel, it can be very provocative, can't it? Jesus' hearers surely would have loved hearing that Isaiah 61 was being fulfilled. They surely would have loved knowing the great year of jubilee was dawning, that there was release, and forgiveness. But they couldn't stand the fact that it was being fulfilled in a different way than they had expected, that it wouldn't be restricted to Israel alone. From their perspective, God was rescuing the wrong people.<sup>23</sup>

You see, this is what Jesus wants us to grasp. His manifesto is incredibly all-encompassing. He wants to reach everyone. And in theory, we nod our heads. We say, yes yes, I'm all for Jesus being inclusive! That's great! But what happens when the rubber hits the road? Think of those whom you are prejudiced against – my assumption is we all have them. Maybe it's those orang Malaya on the other side of the South China Sea: all of them uncivilised crooks. Maybe it's those fundamentalists from another religion, who are always talking about imposing their version of their kingdom upon us. Maybe it's those work colleagues of yours whom you dread working with. Think of those whom you more naturally curse than bless. And

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<sup>23</sup> Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 47.

Jesus wants you to know, that if you receive his manifesto, that means you want them to be blessed too. You don't want them to be on the receiving end of God's judgment.<sup>24</sup> Are there people whom you find such a mess that you refuse to speak or show God's grace to them? Well, Jesus says: These are the kind of people I'm declaring God's favour to. Will they enjoy yours also?<sup>25</sup>

You see, this is Jesus. Sometimes, he doesn't fit our expectations and assumptions. Instead, he provokes us. He says things we absolutely do not like. He challenges us to do things we do not want to do. He refuses our attempts to make him fit what we want him to be. It's sobering, isn't it, to discover Jesus is not being rejected in the home of the Islamist, or the atheist, or the hedonist, but in his hometown synagogue? That's a warning to us, that though we might call ourselves a gospel-centred, evangelical church, when we try to make Jesus fit our agenda, rather than the other way round, we're actually rejecting him. Could we be in danger of doing that? <PAUSE>

So we've seen the manifesto's contents. We've seen the manifesto's reception. But Luke is aware we might have one more question in the back of our minds. *Can Jesus truly deliver on this?* After all, I haven't yet seen a political party that could deliver on every point of theirs! And so we come finally to **this manifesto's viability, in verses 31-44**. And this entire section is really making one big point. Can Jesus

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<sup>24</sup> I didn't have time to unpack it in this sermon, but of course Jesus leaves out the judgment bit of Isaiah 61 when he cites it. For now is the day of salvation.

<sup>25</sup> McKinley, 57.



deliver? Yes, he can! Because his words carry authority like no other! In verses 31 and 32, that's what the people realise, as they listen to Jesus teach. This proclaimer of good news is one-of-a-kind.

But what evidence do we have of his authority? Well, Luke says: watch Jesus. Watch him as he faces two of the biggest enemies we could ever face: evil and death. Watch him face evil first of all. And it's striking, isn't it, where Jesus encounters that evil? Once again, it's not in some far-off Gentile territory, but in a Jewish synagogue! In verse 33, there's a man possessed by a demon, perhaps a regular, or a visitor – we don't know. Here is one of Satan's minions, keeping a man in captivity! And confronted with Jesus, he says: Go away! But what happens when Jesus speak, verse 35? Be quiet! Come out of him! And the demon is compelled to do as Jesus says. I like how brother's pastor explains this: The brevity and immediacy of Jesus' command, he says, underlines his authority. There's no elaborate ceremony. All Jesus has to do is say the word, and the prisoner is set free. No wonder the people react as they do in verse 36 and 37! They have never seen such absolute authority in their lives.

Then watch Jesus face down death second of all. In verse 38 he enters Simon's home, where Simon's mother-in-law is down with fever. And we need to recognise, that back in the ancient world, fevers are matters of life and death! There is no Panadol. But verse 39, Jesus heals her. But what is especially interesting is how Luke describes the

way Jesus heals. He says he “rebuked” the fever. That’s an unusual way of describing it. That’s not how Luke describes other healings, and Mark, who also records this incident, doesn’t describe it that way either. So why say “rebuke”? It’s quite simple really. It’s hidden in the NIV, but back in verse 35, when Jesus commands the evil spirit to leave, it literally says he rebuked the demon! If you look at the ESV you’ll see that clearly. And so Luke wants to make this point.

Whether it’s evil or death, Jesus carries authority over both. He can drive them back. And in both cases, it is his word that does so. You see, Jesus is not No Action Talk Only. Rather, when he speaks, things happen. So when he says his manifesto will be carried out, you can be sure it will.

And did you notice one other thing Jesus does with his words? He silences the demons. That’s surprising, isn’t it? After all, they’ve spoken the truth! He is Jesus of Nazareth! He is the Holy One of Israel! But Jesus silences them, because he knows that at this very moment, the people don’t quite understand how he will carry out his manifesto. They don’t understand how he intends to use his authority. All they can think about is how he can heal them from sickness and cast out demons, as verse 42 testifies to. And Jesus certainly intends to bring healing and deliverance. But to do that in a full and final way, he must become poor. He must become afflicted. He must experience darkness. The Servant of Isaiah 61 must become the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52-53. As he heals and casts out demons, he is giving a

preview of what his final kingdom will be like – a life with no mourning and suffering. But that kingdom is established only as he goes to the cross.

So my friends, this is the manifesto of Jesus. It is a manifesto that is still in effect today. And that means: today can still be the day of the Lord's favour. Today can still be the day you experience true freedom. So say today: Jesus, I need you. Jesus, I receive you on your terms, not mine. I acknowledge your absolute authority over all of me. And as we do so, here's the good news. The prisoner will be set free, and the blind will see. This is why Jesus has come. Let's proclaim this good news, and praise and thank him.