

HEARERS OF THE WORD



Nehemiah 8:2-6, 8-10; Ps 19 (18); 1 Cor 12:12-30; Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21

Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing

1:1 Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3 I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

4:14 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, 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, 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.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The reading of the Gospel according to Luke, the Gospel of this liturgical year, begins formally today. To signal this start, the lectionary combines two distinct passages, the formal introduction to the Gospel in chapter 1 and the scene in Nazareth in chapter 4. The first of these gives us the motivation and approach of the writer. The second gives us the first

part only of the scene in Nazareth 4:14-30 and the second part, vv. (21)22-30, is read the following week. The reason behind this somewhat cumbersome division may have been brevity – to keep the Gospel reading to a reasonable length. Unfortunately, the division of the scene in Nazareth into two Sundays makes it difficult to make sense of the *tableau* as a whole. It will be, accordingly, important to keep that whole scene in mind (vv. 14-30) when reading only the first part of it (14-21). Finally, this is one of the most inspirational passages in the New Testament, underlining, as it does, the gift of the Spirit and the anointing of Jesus as prophet and Messiah.

KIND OF WRITING

(a) 1:1-4. This is a standard introduction to a typical biography of the period. Such a preface is unique among the Gospels, having its only parallel in Acts 1:1-2. There is another, resumptive introduction in Lk 3:1-2.

(b) 4:14-30. The opening scene in Nazareth expands the same scene from Mark 6 (see below), turning it into a synthesis of the whole mission of Jesus, including his death and resurrection. The elements are as follows:

- Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures, as the Servant of the Lord.
- Initially, he was well received by God’s first chosen people.
- The opening to the Gentiles (Elijah and Naaman the Syrian and Elisha the widow of Zarephath) led to conflict and eventually to rejection.
- Eventually Jesus will indeed be taken “outside their town” and be put to death, actually in Jerusalem.
- But, in the resurrection, he would mysteriously pass “through the midst of them” and go “on his way.”

Historically, we may say there is a slender core of historicity; mostly, however, 4:14-30 is Luke’s literary and theological

Thought for the day

One of the encouraging signs in today’s church is the growing popularity of *lectio divina*, praying the Scriptures. This is best done with other people because it is so enriching as we benefit from the observations and questions of fellow pilgrims. It comes alive when I can say “today, this scripture has been fulfilled in *my* hearing.”

Prayer

Lord, inspire me to read your Scriptures and to meditate upon them day and night. I beg you to give me real understanding of what I need, that I in turn may put its precepts into practice. Yet, I know that understanding and good intentions are worthless, unless rooted in your graceful love. So I ask that the words of Scripture may also be not just signs on a page, but channels of grace into my heart. Amen. (*Origen*, 184-253 AD)

skill, arming the careful reader before the ministry starts. The reader can also see why it is vital to read the entire scene in Nazareth: the whole ministry in encapsulated in this symbolic *tableau*, providing the reader with essential guidance for reading the Gospel of Luke as a whole. Such a reading also helps “explain” Jesus’ inexplicable turning on the audience in 4:23-27, to be read next week. That Luke is conscious of writing a symbolic *tableau* may be seen from the correspondences with Luke 7 in the chart overleaf. Chapter 7 resumes *in reverse order* the marks of the Messiah announced in chapter 4.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The OT citation is from two places in Isaiah. It is interesting to note what has been added, changed (underlined) and omitted by Luke (italics).

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, *to bind up the brokenhearted*, to proclaim liberty to the captives, *and release to the prisoners*; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour, *and the day of vengeance of our God*; to comfort all who

mourn. (Is 61:1–2)

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? (Is 58:6)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Mark the basis for Luke's re-working

Jesus left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offence at him. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief. (Mark 6:1–6)

ST PAUL

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! (2 Cor 6:1–3)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 Luke admits he is not the first. Scholars understand that Luke used both Mark and Q, a Sayings Source of some 252 verses, shared with Matthew. He has also his own source, L, as well as a capacity to create and /or radically "adjust" material.

We do not really know who the writer was. A composite picture can be gleaned from Luke-Acts: Well-educated; well-travelled; writes good and varied Greek; someone at home in the upper middle class of the Hellenistic world; for convenience "Luke", but really unknown. The oldest manuscript of Luke is P75, dating from c. 175-225 and now in the Vatican Library. It preserves Lk 3:18-24:53.

Verse 2 He also acknowledges he is not an eyewitness "from the beginning". Handed down is a technical term for tradition, so we are to think of second and third generation traditions.

4:18-19 *The Spirit of the Lord...*

7:1-10 *Healing of a sick slave (belonging to a Gentile soldier)*

4:22 *All spoke well of him...*

7:11-17 *Raising of a Widow's Son*

4:25-26 *Raising of a Widow's Son*

7:18-20 *Are you the one?*

4:27 *Cleansing of a Leper (Gentile soldier)*

7:21-23 *Details of Jesus' ministry*

4:28-30 *Offence is taken*

7:23 *Happy the one who takes no offence at me.*

Verse 3 Theophilus (lit. "loved by God") may be an individual of some status (cf. Acts 23:36) or any intended reader, as a "friend of God." The evangelist offers an "orderly account" by which he does not mean a historical sequence as we would intend it. He is motivated by faith and his literary choices are dictated by theology. A good example would be his location of this scene at Nazareth at the start of Jesus' ministry.

Verse 4 The motive behind the Gospel is to ground the faith of the believers.

Verse 14 The ministry is Jesus is powered by the Spirit—very important in Luke and in Acts. Already in Luke 1-4, everything is the initiative of the Spirit Luke 1:15, 17, 35, 41, 47, 67, 80; 2:25–27; 3:16, 22; 4:1.

Verse 15 Notice *their* synagogues, indicating a time after the parting of the ways between synagogue and church. The synagogue dates to the time of the Exile, when the exiles needed a gathering place (without priest or sacrifice).

Verse 16 From Luke 1-2, we learn Jesus was brought up at Nazareth (Luke 1:26; 2:4, 39, 51; 4:16). He is known as Jesus of Nazareth (4:34; 18:37; 24:19).

Verse 17 The telling slows down to create suspense.

Verse 18 In Isaiah, it is not the prophet who is speaking but the Servant, predicted by the prophet. The citation is abbreviated and a threatening tone eliminated. In this Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as a prophet-martyr, whose death can be understood in the light of persecution of the prophets of old (see, for example, Luke 11:47, 49–50; 13:28, 33–34; 20:6; 24:19, 25, 27, 44). The term anointed in Greek gives us our word Christ (Messiah).

Verse 19 The whole gospel proclamation is under the banner of the Jubilee Year, a symbol of liberation.

Verse 20 Again, the story telling slows down to augment our anticipation.

Verses 21 The single sentence is emblematic of Jesus as the fulfilment of the Scriptures, an important theme in Luke-Acts (Luke 1:1, 20, 45; 4:21; 21:22, 24; 22:16, 37; 24:44). "Today", the now of salvation, is also a vital component of the proclamation of Luke: cf. Zacchaeus and the Good Thief. In Luke, nothing is accidental: Jesus' very first word in this Gospel is "today." I.e. a new time has started, a new era of salvation, under the banner of the Year of Jubilee.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Jesus was filled with the Spirit and sent. He came bursting with a message to communicate. When have you had the experience of being enthused by something in that way? Who have been the people you met who had that kind of enthusiasm?
2. The message Jesus had was one of liberation and he told his listeners that it was being fulfilled even as they listened. When have you had a NOW moment of liberation? When has bible reading been an experience of liberation for you?
3. His message was addressed to those who were poor, oppressed, blind, or captives. Who are these today? In what ways have I been, or am I, among these? How has the message of Jesus been good news for you, freed you, given you new sight, or revealed God's favour to you?

PRAYER

Lord, God, whose compassion embraces all peoples, whose law is wisdom, freedom, and joy for the poor, fulfil in our midst your promise of favour, that we may receive the gospel of salvation with faith and, anointed by the Spirit, freely proclaim it.

Now, you are the body of Christ

1 Cor 12:12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

1 Cor 12:14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body;” that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 21 The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”

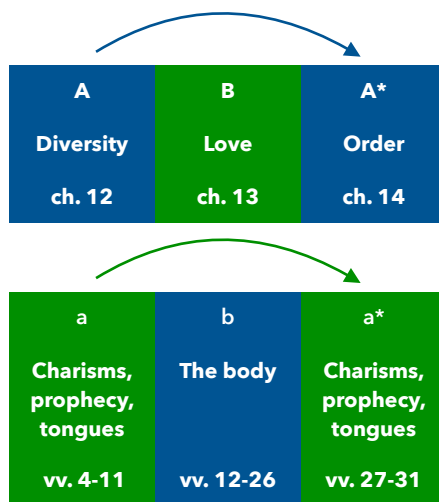
22 On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; 24 whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, 25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.

1 Cor 12:27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31 *But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Paul draws on an available metaphor, the body (it was used by the Stoics to reflect on society as a whole). Note, however, the while variety and diversity are essential, primacy is given to the whole, the one body which articulates the gifts.

KIND OF WRITING



The pattern should help us see what Paul is up to. In vv. 12-26, Paul develops a principle (the body) which he will apply to an issue (the gifts). V. 31 begins next week’s excerpt, but is included here.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Across 1 Corinthians, status rivalry is a recurring issue. *Spiritual* rivalry is more insidious because it is masked by gifts which are, in themselves, really good.

RELATED PASSAGES

Cf. Romans 12:3-8.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 12 “Body” is a commonplace in political rhetoric of the period. Notice Paul does *not* say “so it is with the church.” The focus is on Christ.

Verse 13 Paul goes back to the fundamental unity in the Spirit through baptism. This is akin to the common acclamation “Jesus is Lord”, thus preceding later, false claims of status. Everything is a gift to everyone (NB “all” three times).

Verse 14 The initial emphasis on diversity can be misleading. Paul is really interested in the many members performing their functions for the sake of the body. Paul does not support post-modern individualism.

Verses 15-17 This needs little comment except to suspect that Paul may be writing with a smile on his lips.

Verse 18 A conclusion is drawn from the metaphor. “Arranged” is a bit weak; “established” might be better.

Verses 19-21 This is a short summary, again with a bit of humour. V. 20 is a reiteration of vv. 12 and 14.

Verse 22 A big translation issue arises: how to understand and translate “weak” and “strong” in the context. Such words (and related ones) are used in 1 Corinthians as status terms. Here Paul turns the ordinary perception of the hierarchy of the body on its head (so to speak). What we perceive as the normal hierarchy of members in the body is only an apparent surface hierarchy. In human dress *and in the view of God*, the less honourable is given greater honour. This takes us straight back to Christ and the cross: *For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.* (1Corinthians 1:25)

Verses 23-24a Cf. the translation of Thistleton (NIGTC): *and on what we deem to be less honourable parts of the body we invest with greater honour, and our unpresentable private parts have greater adornment to make them presentable.*

Verses 24b-26 The word “dissension” is a not-so-oblique shot at the reality of the Corinthian church.

Verse 27 A plain application, building on the metaphor but in its revised meaning whereby “normal” hierarchies are reversed in Christ.

Verse 28 A wonderful, even enviable lists of gifts and ministries.

Verse 29-30 The use of rhetorical questions is both engaging and climactic, leading to the crowning ambiguity of v. 31. (More on that next week!)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. We do not come to God alone but a members of the community of faith, with different gifts.
2. When have I suffered with the body? When have I rejoiced with the body?

PRAYER

According to your wisdom, O God, it is not good for us to be alone especially in the community of faith. Help us to embrace our belonging for your great glory.

Ezra opened the book!

Neh 7:73 *When the seventh month came—the people of Israel being settled in their towns—* 8:1 *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. 4 The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; *and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand.* 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 worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. 7 *Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Janin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places.* 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.

Neh. 8:9 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.” 11 *So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, “Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.”* 12 *And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This remarkable scene anticipates Jesus opening the scroll and readings. It does, however, have its own context and meaning.

KIND OF WRITING

Ezra came to Jerusalem in 458 BC; Nehemiah arrived in 445 BC. In spite of what it says in the Bible, it seems these were not together in Jerusalem. The books we have now were substantially completed in the 5th century. The account given here in Nehemiah 9 would fit best between Ezra 8 and 9.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah can be confusing. Originally, the biblical Ezra and Nehemiah were one work. (There are other books of Ezra / Esdras, but the contents and titles are also confusing.)

Ezra 1:1–6:22, return from exile and rebuilding of the temple
Ezra 7:1–10:44, the initial work of Ezra
Neh 1:1–7:73 a, return of Nehemiah and rebuilding of wall of Jerusalem
Neh 7:73b–10:39, Torah, confession, and firm agreement
Neh 9:38–10:30, a firm agreement to keep the Torah
Neh 11:1–13:31, the climax of Nehemiah’s work and related matters

Our unit runs from 7:73b to 8:12.

RELATED PASSAGES

Then the king directed that all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem should be gathered to him. The king went up to the house of the Lord, and with him went all the people of Judah, all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests, the prophets, and all the people, both small and great; he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord. The king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the Lord, to follow the Lord, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. All the people joined in the covenant. (2 Kings 23:1–3)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 73b In later times, the first day

of the seventh month was New Year’s Day.

Verse 1 The book of the Law may reflect portions or even the substance what became the Pentateuch. In Hebrew it says “the book of the Torah of Moses” (cf. Neh 13:1).

Verse 2 Precisely to permit the presence of both people and clergy, the meeting is held outside the precincts of the Temple.

Verse 3 The Water Gate is in the east of the city. The reading takes six hours - a certain contrast with people’s liturgical stamina today!

Verse 4 The “dais” may reflect the later furniture of the synagogue or else a platform as in 2 Chron 6:13.

Verse 5 Great honour is given as the scroll is opened.

Verse 6 The double amen expresses agreement with the content as well as commitment to put it into practice.

Verse 7 Thirteen Levites carried out their usual teaching functions (Deut 33:10; 2 Chron 17:7-9; 35:3).

Verse 8 A summary of vv. 4-7. Some system of translation into Aramaic may be intended, organised or spontaneous.

Verse 9 The day is declared holy. (The mention of Nehemiah is most likely secondary here.) NB the emotional reactions.

Verse 10 The day’s holiness is marked by sharing of resources.

Verses 11-12 The Levites repeat the admonition to observe the day with joy.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. A new start: when have I experienced that in a lasting way? Has it happened for me on the way of discipleship?

2. The rapt attention of the people is a challenge: really listening to the word and letting yourself be addressed deeply from within.

3. The Amen, Amen expresses a renewed commitment, just like the Amen at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer.

PRAYER

Lord, you call us to a new covenant through your living word. May this word penetrate our hearts and change our lives. Amen, Amen.

THE LITURGY

Nehemiah 8:2-6, 8-10; Ps 19 (18); 1 Cor 12:12-30; Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21

READINGS 1 AND 3

The future threat of opposition prepared well for the Gospel, which foreshadows the opposition Jesus will meet.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The psalm recounts confidence in God—surely needed in the case of Jeremiah!

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19

What is a prophet? The call of Jeremiah captures something of the role and challenge. It might help to call to mind prophets in our own day, people who speak out awkward truths.

Second reading

1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13

This is a great reading—very rich and poetic. Love is praised as a person and we can see ourselves in the portrait.

Gospel

Luke 4:21-30

This is the second half of a symbolic *tableau*, foreshadowing the later ministry of Jesus: the opposition he would encounter and his victory in resurrection. Jesus stands in the tradition of those prophets who suffered for their message and often paid for it with their lives.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 27 January

St Angela Merici, virgin

Hebrews 9:15, 24-28

The reading answers a question: was the death of Jesus, once for all, sufficient or must it be repeated? His death was the one, all-perfect act of obedience which fulfilled the previous Temple sacrifice and abolished it.

Mark 3:22-30

It can still shock that some of Jesus contemporaries proposed he was doing the work of the evil one. The thinking may have been like this: he is doing powerful deeds, but we do not believe he comes from God. *Therefore...*!

Tuesday 28 January

St Thomas Aquinas, religious and doctor

Hebrews 10:1-10

The blood offerings of the Temple are replaced by Jesus' offering of his obedience and faithfulness. In this reading we see an important reception of Jesus' own faithfulness towards his Abba.

Mark 3:31-35

Our reading can feel a little unsettling because it sounds like Jesus is dismissing his family, including his mother. However, it is really an affirmation of discipleship.

Wednesday 29 January

Hebrews 10:11-18

One of the ways in which Jesus' offering surpasses Temple sacrifice is that his offering does not need to be repeated: it was once for all. His offering does not need to be repeated because it was both spiritual (not external) and complete (not partial).

Mark 4:1-20

This long reading can be tricky. The original parable is given first, a parable *from the lips of Jesus*. The later explanation of the parable comes *from church tradition*, a kind of allegorical reading. The allegory narrows the original meaning of the parable. In between, the question of the disciples is difficult. It seems to be answering a later issue: how was that that most of Jesus' fellow Jews did not recognise him as the Messiah?

Thursday 30 January

Hebrews 10:19-25

In today's reading we are invited to follow the example of Jesus in giving himself. The blood here is not to be understood as a payment but rather stands for the whole person of Jesus. Just as he paved the way wholeheartedly, we are called to a no less wholehearted response.

Mark 4:21-25

It may help to recall that in those days a lamp was a naked flame. Putting it under a bed would not be advisable at all! The enigmatic second saying is presented as a shocking contrast. It should read,

“from the one who thinks he has (but really does not), even what he thinks he has will be taken away. It is a stern wake-up call.

Friday 31 January

St John Bosco, religion

Hebrews 10:32-39

When others fall away, it can be tempting to copy our contemporaries. But, says the writer, remember that all who went before us suffered too for the faith. Discipleship is no cheap grace.

Mark 4:26-34

A further few seed parables illuminate the Gospel. The parable of the farmer asleep is especially encouraging: just let things grow. Cf. *I planted, Apollonios watered, but God gave the growth.* (1 Corinthians 3:6)

Saturday 1 February

St Brigid, abbess, patron of Ireland



Job 31:16-20, 24-25, 31-32

The reading is chosen because it reflects on generosity towards the needy, a key characteristic of St Brigid. It would be great if we could all say the same about ourselves!

Ephesians 3:14-21

This wonderful prayer is chosen to reflect the single-minded devotion to God and Christ which marked the life of St Brigid.

Luke 6:32-38

In these simple instructions, a whole sale of life is portrayed, leading to deep living and even deeper happiness.