**4th January 2015**

**Focus Scripture: Luke 4:14–21**

I’m sure we have seen some films over the Christmas period. It’s traditional to eat too much and then slump on the sofa and watch a movie. Bouyed by my dissection of Frozen on Christmas Eve I thought I would comment on three new movies at the cinema over the next month as the backbone of this sermon.

There is a new film out called *Unbroken*. Angelina Jolie is the director and it is tipped for honours. Audiences are told “Unbroken” is a “true story.” It is true, as far as it goes, but the story is incomplete.

The film tells the story of Louis Zamperini. He was an Olympic finalist for the United States at the Hitler Berlin Olympics of 1936. He was in the US air force in the Second World War and his plane crashes in the sea and he survives 47 days in a life raft before being captured by the Japanese and interned in a Prisoner of War camp, where he endures torture and brutality until its liberation. .

There have been many World War II stories told in film depicting triumphs of personal courage and survival. The story of [Louis Zamperini](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/louis-zamperini/) is one such story, but with an added dimension. [Zamperini](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/louis-zamperini/), who died this year at age 97, came home an angry man. He became addicted to alcohol and cigarettes and verbally abused his young wife as he wrestled with his inner demons. After returning to Los Angeles, [Zamperini](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/louis-zamperini/) is shown hugging his brother and parents, but the film ends there. Director [Angelina Jolie](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/angelina-jolie/) attempts to put some flesh on the bones at the end of the film with some still shots and words that tell us that [Zamperini](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/louis-zamperini/)’s faith led him to return to Japan on a personal mission of reconciliation.

In media appearances, Angelina Jolie has refused to discuss why the most remarkable part of [Zamperini](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/louis-zamperini/)’s story was excluded from the film. The book of the film tells how Zamperini was converted at the 1949 Billy Graham crusade in Los Angeles. The book by Laura [Hillenbrand](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/hillenbrand/), tells how Zamperini came home, poured his alcohol down the drain, threw out his cigarettes, was reconciled with his wife and became a new man because, he said, he had asked Jesus Christ to be his saviour. It was his faith that gave him the conviction and strength to go back to Japan and forgive his captors.

It is puzzling why  [Jolie](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/angelina-jolie/), who directed the film, left out the most important part of [Zamperini](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/louis-zamperini/)’s story. Apologists for Universal Pictures say people can always read the rest of the story in the book. Yes, they can, but then why should they see a film that depicts only half a life?

Just before he died, [Miss Jolie](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/angelina-jolie/) showed [Zamperini](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/louis-zamperini/) a rough cut of the film. He professed to like it and said it doesn’t force religion down people’s throats. That’s a cliché, which doesn’t really fit in this instance. Nothing is “forced” when it is true.

At this time of year wherever you look someone is trying to offer you a course that will help your health and wellbeing. Whether it’s a yoga class, a mindfulness course, a relaxation session, a gym membership. After the excess of the Christmas period the promotion of these various activities suggest that should you participate in them they will improve your health and well-being.

Well if you had talked to Louis Zamperini he would have told you that his health and well-being was dramatically affected by deciding to follow Jesus Christ.

This month our theme is following Jesus. At the start of a new year I want to set out some reasons why following Jesus Christ will lead you into health and well-being. . He is the Way, the truth and the life. Unlike some of the other options for health and well bring, following Jesus I will argue, is more comprehensive and wide ranging. It touches on the political, it touches on the personal, it touches on the ultimate and the eternal, and it deals not just with superficial stuff in our lives but the real important stuff. Over these next few weeks we will look at how following Jesus is life giving and life changing and the best thing you can do in this New Year.

In the gospel reading we see a congregation gathered and attentive as the scriptures are read. Jesus observes Sabbath by going to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. He is asked to read something from scripture. He stands to read scripture and sits to speak, as was the custom of rabbis.

What did Jesus teach about God’s way to those in the Nazareth synagogue? He starts ‘the Spirit is upon me….’ There is an obvious connection that Jesus makes between his experience of baptism and the prompting of the Spirit, pressing him into the wilderness and then into a ministry of teaching and proclamation in Galilee. Certainly Jesus now consciously opts for the cause of the poor, imprisoned and oppressed, making this his priority out of all the options he could have chosen. Some call this his manifesto. This is what I’m about!

Jesus brings the good news of God – announce, release, recovery, setting free.

Many of the alternative holistic spiritualties and therapies promoting health and well-being will be focused on individual health and well-being. It’s all about me – so long as I’m feeling OK that’s the most important thing. It is a self-centred approach. In the coming weeks I will deal with how following Jesus helps us cope with our failings and our guilt and answers the deepest questions of our lives and the issue of well-being – knowing we are loved and accepted.

But this text reminds us that for the Christian our individual well-being and health is bound up with the health and well-being of those around us, our neighbours in our own community and in our own nation and in the world.

There is always a threefold dimension to our health and well-being. In simplistic form: love yourself, love God and love your neighbour.

Often we reduce the Christian good news to ‘God loves me and if I believe in Jesus there will be a place for me in heaven when I die’ Jesus hardly mentioned the afterlife in his ministry. His message was about the kingdom of God. His actions and ministry were about the kingdom of God: announcing, releasing, recovering and setting free. All of that was part of the work of salvation. Following Jesus will immerse you in that work.

This New Year will feature a general election in May. The next four months the battle for votes will be engaged. The Bible is hugely political in that it sets out many principles for the well-being of society – the common good.

Another Hollywood blockbuster film at the moment is Exodus: Gods and Kings – which is a retelling of the story of Moses. The story of Moses is of course a story of liberation from the dominance and tyranny of Pharaoh and the exodus to the Promised Land. The first five books of the Bible give instructions for creating a very different world from what they had known in Egypt. The laws are very diverse ranging from dietary and sexual matters to radical economic principles concerning land and debt.

 So for example every family was to have its own piece of land so that they could earn a living and not go hungry. Land could not be bought or sold so that large landowners and the growth of landless peasants could be avoided. Debt was not to be entered into lightly. No interest was to be charged on debts. Every seventh year, the Sabbath year, all debts were to be forgiven and slaves set free. The intention was clear – to prevent a permanently impoverished underclass emerging. The law of Jubilee, every fiftieth year, all agricultural land that had been sold due to payment for debt, had to be returned to the original family of ownership without compensation.

The “year of God’s favour” at the end of these words from Isaiah that Jesus quotes, refers to Israel’s tradition of Jubilee. There is no evidence that Israel ever fully kept a year of Jubilee, yet it remained a promise and hope. Next month we will go back to the Old Testament and the story of David and how Israel went on to establish kings who ended up acting like Pharaoh – which would promote the prophets to come and speak out about what had happened to God’s plan for his people and how their society should function. They didn’t listen to the prophets – so God turns up – in the flesh. The incarnation, Christmas, is not a sentimental exercise on God’s part just to reassure us that he’s there and that he cares about us. It is also a challenge and a judgement. Jesus comes to inaugurate the kingdom of God, to restore the political vision of what the kingdom looked like, in opposition to the kingdoms of this world that enslave, dominate and destroy people. Now, in Luke’s account, Jesus begins his public ministry by announcing after this reading from Isaiah: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Was Jubilee to come at last?

Well of course such a claim would upset those who owned the land at present and who were comfortable in the status quo. You can start to see that the manifesto of Jesus is not going to be universally welcomed. The reaction to Jesus caused unrest in Nazareth and nearly cost Jesus his life and eventually would cost him his life.

The concern of Jubilee and the laws of the Bible about land and debt were to create a world unlike that of Egypt. It was to be a world in which every family had the material basis of existence thus has enough to live on and in which no one is permanently enslaved and impoverished. These are the key issues of the bible. Already we can predict the key issues of the forthcoming election. The economy and who will best look after it and give us the best hope of growth and prosperity. Immigration: concern that we are being overrun by immigrants and interfered with by the European Union. The welfare of the least in our society, the concern that people ae being trapped in debt, enslaved by low paid jobs, literally being enslaved in forms of trafficking, and in addictive behaviour from online gambling and pornography, to drugs and alcohol will in all probability not feature high on the election concerns. But they would feature high on the election agenda of Jesus if Luke chapter 4 is anything to go by.

Every now and again it’s good to consider what we are about as a church. The start of a new year is as good a time as ever. Church mission statements like company and business mission statements can often be treated with a dose of cynicism – they get put up on walls and at the top of headed notepaper and then completely ignored. Which is why they do need looking at every now and again to get your organisation thinking through once more, ‘what are we about?’

Ours reads as the following:

Called to be God’s People,

Transformed by the gospel

Making a difference in the world

Perhaps we need to compare it to **Luke 4:18–19**. Where are the points of connection between the two?

Can we identify the programs in which our church is actively engaged which would fit into the works identified in these verses and Jesus’ teaching of God’s ways?

Announce, release, recovery, setting free.

This will be an exciting year for us as a church, what with the new youth centre about to open. We pray that the work and activity that will go on in that place will be about announcing good news, releasing people, recovering and setting free lives.

Maybe you are in need of being released, set free. Maybe you are searching for good news. Maybe you want to recover a part of your life, your identity. We pray for the Spirit of God to be at work in your life.

Be open to the work of the Spirit of God. You do that through being humble before God. Asking God to guide you and work in you. You need to be in touch with the fellowship of the church, the ministry of the saints, and the priesthood of all the believers – together we mediate the presence of Jesus and encourage each other with our collective wisdom and prayerful discernment – there is strength in being together. It is not too late to be part of a church house group.

But you also need to be intentional about your faith. To love God, to Love your neighbour, to love yourself needs intent – discipline, practice. Pray, worship, meditate on the scriptures, make time to be in a place where you can be transformed by the gospel and be a transforming influence for others. More of that in the future weeks.

Jesus was moving in the power of the Spirit. The Spirit of God is called the empowerer, the guide, the comforter.

When you read of the Spirit’s work in scripture the Spirit of God prompts us into mission – places on our hearts burdens and passions for certain things – promptings to get involved in certain actions.

 Is the Spirit of God upon you? Where is the Spirit of God prompting you? Try not to resist – because actually that is where you will probably find your deepest fulfilment. Much better to be doing stuff that deep down is where your gifts and your passion and drive lies – where you are a round peg in a round hole. Often we end up in jobs that are not really us and sometimes we get stuck there. Sometimes that happens in church.

*Some people may have pastoral gifts – the sort of people others find it easy to talk with, who are good at listening and can empathise, the type of individuals other confide in and who have a great love and concern for others ;*

*Some find great fulfilment in organising something well and making something happen and that it is well run - a gift in administration;*

*Others are practical and enjoy doing a task with an end in sight and that they can then stand back and think job well done; Others have a great passion to see a more just world, to care for the poor, to share the good news of the Christian faith and see others come to faith – they are gifted in Mission;*

*Others take their delight in worshipping God and leading others in worship, a deep desire to understand scripture and share that with others, an ability to communicate and lead others in prayer - to put into words what others may be thinking – a gift for worship and education.*

Where is the Spirit on you? Where are you being prompted to be part of the agenda of Jesus?

Announce, release, recovery, setting free.

One man who was anointed by the Spirit of God was Martin Luther King. Part of his story will be told in the film Selma which will be released next month. Surely even Hollywood can’t overlook the Christian aspect of Martin Luther King.[[1]](#endnote-1) The Civil Rights Act of 1964 legally desegregated the South; discrimination was still rampant in certain areas, making it very difficult for blacks to register to vote. In 1965, the Alabama city of Selma became the battleground in the fight for suffrage. Despite violent opposition, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his followers pressed forward on an epic march from Selma to Montgomery, and their efforts culminated in President Lyndon Johnson signing the Voting Rights Act of 1965

The film “Selma,” would be incomplete if it failed to depict the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. as a minister whose faith motivated him to be a modern-day Moses.

Martin Luther King is a great hero of mine. Ten years ago I had my last Sabbatical, I am due one this year, and we spent three months in Atlanta in the States, where King had his church and based his civil Rights movement. It was inspiring to see his museum and read about his life. His famous ‘I have a dream’ speech is of course rooted in biblical allusions and is centred on God.

King knew that God and God alone gives us the interior resources to bear the burdens and tribulations of life, especially those that come as we fulfil our call to serve others and to stand for what is right in this world.Had he not known how to move from action back into prayer—how to tap into a deeper Source than mere human activism—we would have lost him to fear and discouragement; the forces of evil would have prevailed, at least for a little while longer.

In a sermon entitled “Our God is Able”, King tells a very personal story of how an intimate encounter with God sustained him in the darkest hour of his fight for freedom and equality. When he began receiving death threats just before the Montgomery bus protest, he came to the end of his own inner resources and almost gave into fear. But it was an encounter with God at his kitchen table that empowered him to continue saying yes to his calling. “At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced him. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, ‘Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth.  God will be at your side forever.’ Almost at once my fears passed from me.  My uncertainty disappeared.  I was ready to face anything.  The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm.” [v]

King’s choice to orient himself towards God in the midst of the resistance that his action had stirred up became a pivotal moment in his life as a leader. It solidified his calling, transformed his fear into a deep sense of calm, and gave him the strength to go on.  Were it not for his full engagement in the fight for justice andhis grounded-ness in the life of prayer, he might never have had the kind of encounter with God that transformed him in the deepest level of his being.[[2]](#endnote-2)

*Hear Dr. King as he speaks to the man or woman who contends that God is unnecessary or irrelevant to our modern lives:*

*"At times we may feel that we do not need God, but on the day when the storms of disappointment rage, the winds of disaster blow, and the tidal waves of grief beat against our lives, if we do not have a deep and patient faith, our emotional lives will be ripped to shreds. There is so much frustration in the world because we have relied on gods rather than God. We have genuflected before the god of science only to find that it has given us the atomic bomb, producing fears and anxieties that science can never mitigate. We have worshiped the god of pleasure only to discover that thrills play out and sensations are short-lived. We have bowed before the god of money only to learn that there are such things as love and friendship that money cannot buy and that in a world of possible depressions, stock market crashes, and bad business investments, money is a rather uncertain deity. These transitory gods are not able to save us or bring happiness to the human heart. Only God is able. It is faith in him that we must rediscover. With this faith we can transform bleak and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of joy and bring new light into the dark caverns of pessimism."(Strength to Love, p. 51)*

Are you discouraged when you see the need in our world? Or are you frustrated by your inability to genuinely love others who are different from you? Martin Luther King recommended faith in Jesus of Nazareth as antidotes for both maladies.

*"Evil can be cast out, not by man alone nor by a dictatorial God who invades our lives, but when we open the door and invite God through Christ to enter. 'Behold, I stand at the door, and knock; if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.' God is too courteous to break open the door, but when we open it in faith believing, a divine and human confrontation will transform our sin-ruined lives into radiant personalities."* (*Strength to Love,* p. 126)

May God fill us with His Spirit and help us in worship and service this year, as we follow Jesus, announcing good news, releasing people, recovering and setting free lives.

And may we have a happy and healthy new year – not just for ourselves and those we love but for our neighbours as well.

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1. Using material from an artcileby *Cal Thomas* Read more: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/dec/28/cal-thomas-louis-zamperini-unbroken-movie-misses-s/#ixzz3NTPFO9E4>
Follow us: [@washtimes on Twitter](http://ec.tynt.com/b/rw?id=ctd-fI3Dar4z1uacwqm_6r&u=washtimes) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. ©Ruth Haley Barton, 2011. Adapted from “Contemplation in Action: Learning from Martin Luther King, Jr.,”  Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation, Fall/Winter 2010.  This article is not to be reproduced without permission. http://www.transformingcenter.org/2011/01/martin-luther-king-jr-%E2%80%99s-strength-of-soul/ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)