

Background material to help you prepare your sermon, youth or children's activities by getting a clearer picture of the story behind Luke 4.16–24.

Nazareth was where Jesus grew up and his family lived. Joseph was a carpenter and, according to tradition, died when Jesus was relatively young, leaving him the main breadwinner for the family. He ran the carpentry business in what was a small community with a population of no more than 400.

The synagogue in Nazareth was familiar to Jesus and would have been the main gathering place of the community. Synagogue is derived from a Greek word that originally meant *assembly* or *congregation*, referring to gathered people, but over time it came to mean the building where they met.

Archaeological research suggests synagogues of this period were simple buildings with tiered stone benches around the walls, all facing centre. It was here that readings and prayers were conducted. Any teaching would be done from a sitting position and would be followed by questions and discussion in the round. (This helps us understand why Luke spells out that Jesus stood to read but then sat to speak – see 4.16 & 20).

Reading Scripture aloud played a central part in synagogue worship and this was a task open to any man in the congregation. In that sense, there was nothing unusual in Jesus reading from the prophet Isaiah. He was a regular attendee at the Nazareth synagogue (see 4:16 'as usual ...') and had probably read the Old

Testament Scriptures there (and perhaps in other synagogues too) on dozens of occasions. This was a well-known passage where the prophet looked ahead to Yahweh's anointed Servant ushering in a period of blessing for his people. The shocking part was that Jesus, having sat down to offer his thoughts on the familiar passage, applied it to himself and, by inference, laid claim to the title of Messiah (*'the anointed one'*).

The passage Jesus chose comes from Isaiah 61.1–2 (with a phrase added from Isaiah 58.6*) and both this reading and the timing of the event are seen as significant because:

- It comes at the start of Jesus' public ministry
- It follows immediately on from his baptism and temptation
- It is the first detailed public announcement of his mission
- It links with what Luke has already said about the Holy Spirit coming upon Jesus (see 3.22, 4.1, 4.14 & 4.18)
- It occurs in the place where he had lived from childhood
- It suggests what Jesus was teaching in other synagogues (see Luke 4.15)

A manifesto: Because this was a landmark event, the summary of Jesus' sermon that day has become known as *The Nazareth Manifesto*. A manifesto is a declaration of intent (it comes from an old Italian word *manifestare* which means to manifest, to show plainly, to reveal

or display). In an election campaign political parties will publish a manifesto which:

- Explains what they will do if elected
- Promises their programme
- Sets out their agenda

New Testament experts suggest Luke places his account at the start of Jesus' ministry as a declaration of intent on the part of Jesus. Matthew and Mark place it later in his ministry (see Mark 6.1–6, Matthew 13:53–58). Luke has given the story theological weight, not just in its position but also in the sudden change from apparent acceptance by the congregation (22) to outright rejection – to the point of attempted murder (28–29). What caused such a violent swing? The answer for Luke is that Jesus drew attention to God's concern for those beyond the Jewish nation (24–27), a theme that is developed in volume two of his writings – the Book of Acts. For Luke (who was a Gentile), his emphasis is that the Gospel of Christ is for all people everywhere.

Year of Jubilee: Commentators have noted the link between the Isaiah passage and the Jewish Year of Jubilee, as Luke's emphasis on 'freedom' (mentioned twice in verse 18) contains an echo of the special 50th year in every Jewish community (see Leviticus 25). This involved the freeing of slaves, the cancellation of debts, the fallowing of the soil and the returning of all land to its initial distribution under Moses. Jesus is announcing the arrival of the Kingdom of God with the good news of freedom that is both personal and social in its impact.

This makes a helpful link with the theme of Bible Sunday, that the application of the truth of Scripture is always a liberating experience.

*It has been noted that a phrase from Isaiah 61.2 is omitted: 'This is the year when the LORD God will show kindness to us and punish our enemies ... ', and some have suggested this was deliberate in order to stress the grace of God at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

Those were days of opportunity and hope for those who would hear!

Resources

You can download a brief excerpt from the film *Jesus of Nazareth*, which contains a dramatic portrayal of the synagogue service in Nazareth. See:

[youtube.com/watch?v=lohC420duVk&feature=related](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lohC420duVk&feature=related)
(The clip runs for 3' 34".)

SK Catto, *Reconstructing the First-Century Synagogue* (T&T Clark, 2007), pp. 179–185

Synagogues in CA Evans & SE Porter (eds), *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (IVP, 2000), pp. 1145–1153

Jubilee in J Green, S McKnight & IH Marshall, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (IVP, 1992), pp 396–397

JL Green, *The Gospel of Luke – New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1997)

IH Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke – A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Paternoster, 1978)

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