I wonder if you have seen a clip of the sermon the Bishop of Washington, Bishop Mariann Budde, gave at the service before the inauguration of President Trump?

I didn’t see all of it, I just watched a clip of it in which the Bishop asked the President to have mercy on two groups of people whom she said were feeling scared right now. The first group was young LGBTQ people. And the second was people with no citizenship rights in the United States.

Two things struck me as I watched the clip. I felt admiration for the bishop. I felt she spoke with great courage and clarity and her words were rooted in Scripture. “Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger, for we were once strangers in this land.” Yes, he does teach us that.

But I also had a feeling of embarrassment. The inauguration of a new president is supposed to be a day when a nation comes together and unites and looks forward to the future with hope. Even though I am not an American, I felt sad and embarrassed in a way that the Bishop felt she had to use these words – which were divisive and political. I know that President Trump himself uses divisive and inappropriately political language on occasions which demand words of unity and reconciliation. But I can’t help feeling what I feel and I felt admiration mixed with embarrassment.

My daughter, who lives in the USA, suggested I send the bishop a short supportive email to counteract all the hateful and threatening emails she was bound to get. And, indeed, she has confirmed that she has received a number of messages that express the hope that she will die soon. In response she has said she is not afraid. Rather she has repeated who is afraid; young LGBTQ people and immigrants with no citizenship rights, the ones on whose behalf she has asked for the President’s mercy. She, herself, is not scared, she says. Thus showing, again, how well she knows her Scripture. Because Scripture tells us, over and over again, not to be afraid.

So the Bishop spoke with courage before the people. Her words caused some embarrassment. And then there was rage. But she was not troubled by this rage. Because she is not afraid.

And it was much the same when Jesus went back to Nazareth, went to the synagogue and then, in front of the community in which he had grown up, he read from the book of the Prophet Isaiah and speaking with courage, as all eyes were fixed on him, he said, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ And these words provoked first embarrassment and then rage.

This is the moment in Luke’s Gospel when Jesus reveals who he is. Last Sunday we read about the moment in John’s Gospel when Jesus revealed who he is when, at the prompting of his mother, he turned the water into wine. Luke’s Gospel doesn’t have that story. Instead, it includes this story of the time when Jesus went back to his hometown and before his whole community, he read the words of Isaiah prophesying of the anointed one of God who was to come and then said that these words were actually describing him – they were describing Jesus.

It was a very audacious thing to say. And the people were not sure they could believe their ears. Wasn’t this Jesus the son of Joseph the carpenter? Did he just say he was the Messiah?

Now Luke’s Gospel says that Jesus was reading from the Book of Isaiah but the quote from the Book of Isaiah contained in Luke’s Gospel is not entirely accurate.

Luke’s Gospel says that this is what Isaiah says about the Messiah:

‘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.’

It sounds like the sort of thing we expect to read about God in the Bible. God wants to bring good news to the poor, set the captives free, give sight to the blind, let the oppressed go free (so more freedom) and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour, which means a jubilee, a redistribution of wealth in the community according to people’s needs. All, good stuff.

But what the Book of Isaiah actually says is subtly different. Isaiah doesn’t mention the blind but says, instead, that the Messiah will bind up the broken hearted. And then, after the year of the Lord’s favour, Isaiah says God will have a day of vengeance and then goes on at some length to describe what this will be like.

Now, you have to remember that the words of Isaiah were proclaimed to a people in exile, people held captive by a foreign power. To these exiles, working as slaves for a foreign power, the prophet says the Messiah will bring release from captivity and a restoration of their lands which will in future be worked for them by people of other nations. It will be the other nations’ turn to be slaves. The boot will be on the other foot. This is the vengeance of God. Its going to feel very satisfying.

And Jesus misses all that out. And also adds something about blind people regaining their sight. Which might mean that people who are literally blind will be able to see again. Or it might be meant metaphysically; that is to say, it might mean that people who cannot understand things properly now will be able to see things more clearly when the Messiah comes. And that might be a comment on the level of understanding of the people of Nazareth. He might have ad libbed that bit for the benefit of his hearers.

So, what we have here is Jesus reading from scripture and editing it slightly as he reads, in such a way as to shift the emphasis or even change the meaning. And the Gospel records that the people are amazed. Because you have to be pretty sure of yourself to do this.

And remember: Jesus says that he personally is fulfilling this Scripture. But it is amended Scripture that he is fulfilling. Jesus fulfils Scripture while also editing it. Which has really profound implications for anybody is trying to be a follower of Christ when it comes to reading the Old Testament. We should read the Old Testament. After all, Jesus did. And Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament. But watch how he fulfils it. Watch what he takes from it. And watch what he doesn’t take from it. People frequently ask me whether they should accept everything it says in the Old Testament because there are some things in it that are difficult to believe or accept. And my best answer to them is probably to say, read the Old Testament the way Jesus reads it. The fact that you think some bits of it need an edit or two probably means that you are doing that already.

And just in case the people of Nazareth hadn’t got the message, Jesus doubled down on the message. ‘You probably expect me to do some healing miracles like I have been doing up the road at Capernaum. But I’m not going to’. And then he referenced two stories from the Old Testament in a way that he did want us to remember. There is the story about Elijah bringing the son of a widow back to life. Not a Jewish widow, Jesus reminded his listeners, although there would have been plenty of Jewish widows; a Gentile widow from Sidon. And then there is the story of Elisha who healed the leper. Not a Jewish leper, although there would have been plenty of those, but Naaman the Syrian, a Syrian general no less.

But back to the scene in the synagogue: the people of Nazareth didn’t like what they heard. They didn’t like being told that Jesus the son of Jospeh thought he was the Messiah but he was going to perform his healing miracles, not in his home town, but in other towns, and some of those healing miracles would be for Gentiles. They didn’t like it and they were enraged and they tried to kill him but it wasn’t time for Jesus to die.

I think we can understand why the people of Nazareth were so angry. Doesn’t charity begin at home? Before you start worrying about all these foreigners, what about our own people who need healing and justice? We recognise that don’t we? Why are they putting all these refugees in hotels? What about our own homeless? What about homeless veterans? We recognise that, don’t we? Even though I have never met anybody who wanted to help refugees who thought that homeless veterans should be left on the streets. Never mind their hostages, what about our hostages? When are they being set free? What about our country? We used to be a great country. When are we going to be great again?

That’s why you can’t be a prophet in your own town. You might have recognised that quote. A prophet is never loved in his own country. Why do you think that is?

You see, I think that a false prophet will tell his people that God loves them more than he loves other people and intends to favour them over other people and make the other people suffer. There are plenty of false prophets who are saying this sort of thing all round the world and, quite often they do very well out of it. But they are false prophets. They are not telling the truth about God.

A true prophet of God will proclaim that the love that God has is for all humanity. And all humanity will hear that as good news. Except, possibly, his hometown, his own country. All they will hear is; why are you so concerned about those other people. What about us?

Right after the service in the cathedral, Trump [told reporters](https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/5098578-trump-inauguration-prayer-service-not-exciting/) that the sermon “wasn’t too exciting” and that “they can do much better”. Later that day on his Truth Social social media account ratched up the aggression and called Budde a “so-called Bishop” and “Radical Left hard line Trump hater,” going on to insist Budde and the cathedral issue an apology.

He also claimed that many immigrants who had come to the USA had killed people. Which isn’t true but he says it anyway to give his supporters permission to hate other people. And in attacking the bishop in this way, Trump has, of course, given the green light for his supporters to make more unpleasant and aggressive remarks online even than these.

I think we are in very grave danger. The world was already a dangerous place. It has become significantly more dangerous. International efforts to address the climate catastrophe, so vital for our grandchildren, will suffer a significant setback because of the Trump victory. And on top of that, our country will be under serious economic, political and military pressure for the next four years at least. There will be serious attempts to undermine our democracy. There will be a rising tide of disinformation on the internet. Artificial intelligence will, over the next few years, rapidly increase the power of the technology companies whose representatives were so prominent at the inauguration.

And this means that we are going have to be very clear at spotting a false prophet and very good at differentiating a false prophet from a true prophet.

A false prophet, remember, is one invites you to believe that God loves you and favours you over people who are not like you. This is easier to spot when this false prophet is not from your country. It’s more difficult if the words of the false prophet are addressed to you directly. And some of the words from America are addressed to us. When they attempt to stir up race riots on our streets, they are talking to us.

We have to listen to the true prophets, the ones who proclaim the fundamental truth of God’s love for all humanity. These are the prophets that read Scripture the way Jesus read it. And because we are the body of Christ in this place, for this community, we have to be those prophets. God hasn’t sent anybody else.

And the danger is that we will get sucked into debates that will become purely political because the danger we face is very great and the stakes are very high. So in all the words we use, we must make sure that we proclaim the glory of God and his Kingdom.

Remember how Jesus declared to his hometown who he was. God has anointed me he said to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim the release of captives, the recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.

This is how you are going to know who I am, he said. I am anointed by God to do these things. Well, now, here in Alderley Edge, he has anointed us. We are the body of Christ, remember? So, as a body of Christ, we do these things too. It might not necessarily mean that you personally have to say these things. Being part of body means we all have different special roles to play just as different body parts have different ways of serving the body. But don’t assume that you are not one of the prophets. Paul tells the Romans to consider carefully what God may be calling you to do – it may be a bigger and more prominent role than you think.

Can you proclaim good news for the poor, release of captives, that the oppressed should go free? And that other one, the one that Isaiah missed out but Jesus added in. Recovery of sight to the blind.

Because sometimes people can’t see or don’t want to see that God’s love is for all humanity. So we have to proclaim this to them. We have to convince them of this. We are all brothers and sisters, children of God.

His love is for all of us not just for some of us. And we all need to see that. It’s actually the only hope for humanity. But that’s OK. Because we do have hope. The blind will recover their sight, remember? The blind will recover their sight. That’s why God anointed Jesus and gave him to us. And that’s why he has anointed us in turn. Amen.