

Third Sunday after Epiphany

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Introduction

Jesus preaches a sermon in his local synagogue in which he challenges the whole way in which his society is organised. The reading and Jesus interpretation of an Isaiah passage suggest that those inside the religious community need release every bit as much, and perhaps even more, than those among whom Jesus is moving in healing power out in the rest of the country.

Text

Luke 4:14 -21

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

“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,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. 21 He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Comment

I always think that there’s a cinematic quality to this account by Luke and sometimes imagine I can see how each scene might be framed. Jesus returns to his home town a bit of a celebrity and I’m sure the synagogue was packed the day the

big preacher was in town. I imagine dust motes captured in a shaft of light and an uneasy but excitable energy as he stands up to read.

Jesus takes the Isaiah scroll and a moment to select the set passage for the day. There are several coughs from the congregation and some shift uneasily, but otherwise it's silent. And then he reads about the poor and the prisoners and the blind and oppressed. Strange timing that. To be the preacher on the day when this was the passage to be read. It's almost as if he planned it.

Something in the way he read confused the people, they detect a subtext almost as if he is claiming the anointing of the Lord's spirit for himself and it seems possible that this time, in this very familiar reading, the 'me' really means 'me.'

Then slowly, reverently, he rolls up the scroll and hands it back to the *hazzan*, the man responsible for the services in the synagogue. 'What just happened?' they all wonder, even if they don't say it out loud. Every head turns and follows him as he makes his way to the special seat reserved for the preacher, known as Moses' Seat, and he is silent for a time after he sits down.

"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

What did he mean? What is he talking about when he says 'fulfilled' 'today'?

These were just the first words of his sermon and already the temperature was rising. Seated in front of him in rapt attention were the people of his home village where everyone knew their place, and where they all knew Jesus place. These were his neighbours and friends. Some of these adults he had grown up with. And their parents he had learned to respect like his own. Here were the clever and the not so. The good farmers and the lazy. The rich and the poor. Those who were quick with a smile, and those who were more grouchy. Life in all its richness and all its stratification.

In this synagogue, like all the others, there would have been benches on three sides of the room and a small platform at the front where the readers and speakers would stand. The benches would be reserved for the wealthy and important people of the community whilst the others sat on mats on the floor. (Later in Luke 11:43 Jesus criticised the religious leaders who liked to ensure their place in the most important seats.)

So when he reads about the poor and the oppressed and tells them the reading has been fulfilled in their hearing they know he is talking to and about them. The old idea is being exploded by Jesus here, that your place has been assigned to you at birth by your betters and that there is no freedom from this kind of determinism.

Jesus tells everyone in the room that they are the poor, the captive, the blind and the oppressed, that everyone in the room needs released. And he dares to suggest that he is the one who is proclaiming a new way and it begins with the social stratification of the synagogue.

He is announcing God's preferential option for the poor here, which will be heard as a great release by some, and a threat by others. Some will wonder what they are captive to? Others will be in no doubt. And this is at the heart of his messianic identity. Some will be absolutely clear about why some people are poor and why

they are in prison, and clear that they deserve it too. And these people who know these things see them clearly and certainly have no blindnesses from which they need to be healed.

So who does this Jesus think he is? Sure we know where he came from.

Response

This Jesus is the great disturber, even in the place of religious practice where we are loaded down with all kinds of behaviours and habits which make us blind to what is anti-gospel among us. In just the one line, the opening to his sermon, or perhaps the whole of his sermon (how some of us could learn from this kind of powerful brevity!), he has shaken to the core the accepted wisdom of the world of his day. This new community has no place for the kinds of social stratification we like to engage in, or for the ways we use to measure ourselves against each other to see how we can get ahead.

It is a wonderful thing to hear that we are being released from what has held us captive. But it can also be a deeply challenging thing to be confronted with the possibility that what binds us is the very thing we have sought because we thought it would set us free.

Where would I be seated in the synagogue to hear Jesus preach? Which of the four characteristics of Jesus reading do I rejoice in and which might I possibly be offended by: Poor? Captive? Blind? Oppressed?

Note also what Jesus didn't read from Isaiah. He actually stopped reading in the middle of a sentence. The last line should finish "and the day of vengeance of our God." In the context of Jesus vocation, what reason might he have had for leaving this out?

Prayer

God, sometimes it's hard
To rejoice in your grace and generosity.
I confess it's hard to enjoy the riches of blessing
If my enemy isn't impoverished at the same time
It's difficult to rejoice in my freedom
If my enemy isn't permanently condemned.
Teach me the grace and generosity of Jesus
To enjoy the liberating work of Jesus
Without the need to see God's vengeance worked on others.

Amen

