

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

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Introduction

The lectionary allows us two bites at one particular Epiphany cherry – the account of Jesus preaching in his hometown of Nazareth. This week we get, as it were, the manifesto: Jesus' own account of himself; next week we see how people responded and how that response evolved. It's a story which tells us important things about the Kingdom of God and its Messiah; it's also a story in which Simeon's prophecy in [Lk 2: 34–35](#) begins to become actualised and it thus also has useful insights to bring to our thinking about conflict.

Preparation: Find and read the text of a famous speech (recent or historic) which has caused dissension or polarised opinion. Note down any things which strike you about its content, language or form of delivery. Which (if any) do you think played key roles in how the speech was received?

Text

Luke 4:14–21

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.

He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

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,

and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“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."

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.

Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Comment

Through the mouth of Simeon (though the lectionary doesn't actually give us the reading until Candlemas in a few weeks time), Luke has already alerted us to the fact that Jesus' life is going to be attended by controversy and precipitate conflict. The gospel readings over the next two weeks introduce us to the beginning of this sequence and today's portion shows us Jesus making some very deliberate choices around setting the process in motion.

Firstly, there is the matter of timing. We might expect that Jesus, returning from his baptism and time in the wilderness with a clear sense of his identity and mission, and 'filled with the power of the Spirit', would be fired up and raring to get going. However, the text makes it clear that while this is not the first time he has come to the attention of others, he has done nothing up to this point to incite controversy. On the contrary, his reception has been unequivocally and universally positive. It is not until he comes to Nazareth that the die is decisively and deliberately cast – so it would seem that there is also a deliberate choice about location involved.

We might not be surprised that Jesus waits until he is on his own turf before he launches his manifesto – it's something we regular see in our own times. And the fact that both he and his peculiar history are known there is likely to add an extra edge to his words for his listeners, and a different dimension and depth to their responses. We might be more intrigued though by his choice of the synagogue – particularly given that in Luke's account, a significant amount of his teaching and other Kingdom-related activity occurs elsewhere (e.g. 4: 38–40; 5: 1, 17–19, 6:17ff;

7:24ff etc.) However (and against our tendency to assign a primary religious significance to it) the synagogue at the time of Jesus was the location of a fascinating and complex intersection between assorted (and potentially competing) narratives. It was not simply a location of worship and religious teaching, but also an important public space at the centre of communal life in non-religious ways. Indeed, archeological remains suggest that that Torah scrolls did not actually reside in a permanent shrine in the synagogue but were brought into the hall expressly for the Torah-reading ceremony and then removed. Moreover, leadership was open to all and those holding offices in the synagogue were not restricted to a specific socio-religious group^[1]. In effect it was a place with a mixed economy where those who were on the margins in some ways, could also be at the centre of things.

It is against this background that Jesus makes his third deliberate choice – selecting a text which has powerful undercurrents (and also it seems, changing it by additions and omissions as he reads it out). Luke cleverly slows down the story at this point by describing the physical actions of Jesus (16b and 17) and their reverse counterparts (v20). It's almost as though we go into a real-time rendition and the effect is to make the words Jesus chooses the centre of our attention. And, just as the synagogue is not simply and solely a place of religious activity, his chosen text also encompasses a wider community significance.

We have already been alerted – through the voice of Mary (Lk 1:52–55) – to the fact that in Luke's gospel salvation is never a purely 'spiritual' affair: it is always inextricably linked with the overthrow of injustice and oppression, and critique of the political, economic, social and religious structures and systems which enable and sustain them. Jesus' chosen text – an amalgam of Isaiah 58:6 and 61:1–2 – has a strength of imagery and breadth of application which we sometimes lose in translation. 'Retsutsim', the Hebrew word in the Isaiah text which is translated here as 'oppressed' – or sometimes 'downtrodden' – is actually the much stronger and more physical 'smashed' or 'shattered'^[2]. Similarly the reference to 'the poor' resists reduction to both a purely spiritual or a narrowly economic reading. As Joel Green points out, in the social world of Luke-Acts a person's status in the community depended on a range of elements of which money was only one – education, gender, family heritage, religious purity, vocation, etc. all played a role. Hence the designation 'poor' applied to anyone marginalised according to the normal canons of status honour in 1st Century Mediterranean society. In the centre of the community, Jesus challenges the systems – religious, economic and social – that push people to its edges, destroy their self-worth or keep them from flourishing as God intends.

But Jesus is not simply offering a critique, he is announcing the beginning of a change which he (note the repeated personal pronoun in the chosen scripture) will spearhead.

[1] See Lee I. Levine's essay 'The Synagogue' in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 519 – 521.

[2] Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019) vol. 2 *Prophets*, p 817.

Response

Although the conflict in the story has not yet broken out, the words and actions of Jesus offer us some interesting points to reflect on. It is not that either of these, of themselves, provide us with a universal blueprint (they don't!); rather they point us towards the way in which Jesus deliberately sets the stage for what he wants to bring about. It's a masterclass in how to deliver a message for maximum impact without the need for manipulation.

It may be that sometimes, we are ourselves (either as an individual or part of a group) the person who needs to make a stand in word or deed to precipitate a change (even at the cost of precipitating or escalating conflict). If this is the case then we might want to give careful thought to where and how we go about this and what kind of language we use: will our choice of location or medium ensure that those who need to hear can do so? Will the words we use include those we need to reach? Will they bring clarity to our message or cloud its meaning? Will our manner of delivery inspire new thinking or simply inflame old prejudices and passions? And, if the situation calls for it, are we prepared to go beyond abstract critiques and be proactive in bringing about change?

Of course we might also (and perhaps more often) find ourselves on the receiving end of a scenario in which a speech or action provokes strong reactions with ongoing consequences. In such circumstances we can use similar markers to help us critically evaluate what we are hearing or seeing: in what ways are the location, chosen audience, language, style etc contributing to the overall effect? Are they being used in ways which are likely to bring clarity or to further obscure the issues involved? Are they promoting positive moves forward or deepening division? etc.

You might like to go back to your chosen speech or bring to mind another example from current political or religious scenarios and reflect on it in the light of some of the above perspectives. How can we open to hearing the new but also avoid manipulation? How can we ensure that we ourselves guard against manipulating those who listen to us? What can we learn from the way Jesus approaches this conundrum?

Prayer

Holy Spirit,
when we get so carried away
by our passion for a particular end
that we lose our sense
of how to communicate
with propriety rather than pressure,
help us to pause, step back
and recalibrate.

When we get so carried away
by someone else's passion for a particular end
that we lose our sense
of how to listen
with perspective and proportion
help us to pause, step back
and recalibrate.

May our speaking and listening
always be careful and considered
even – and especially – about good ends
for which we have a particular passion
just as Jesus' was
Amen.

Further Reading

Now available via the [Resources](#) section of the website: recordings of Pádraig Ó Tuama's Advent conversations with contributors to the Spirituality of Conflict book.

'what were you arguing about along the way?' is a newly revised and edited collection of Spirituality of Conflict entries for years A, B and C. This volume contains introductions, reflections, responses and prayers for the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter.

Pat Bennett, the theologian, scientist and liturgist (and part of the Spirituality of Conflict team since it began) has spent hundreds of hours reading through the entries, selecting and editing those entries that work well together, and compiling them together in a volume of resources that is rich with support for everyone, whether using it in preparation for preaching, or for personal or group learning.

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