

SO FAR, SO GOOD

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C, 2010

Text: Luke 4:14-21

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Things *were* going *swimmingly* for Jesus, at the end of today's Gospel. It takes a lot to be "praised by everyone," and he was. He had made a successful tour of some villages in Galilee, and his reputation both as a teacher and as a healer was spreading. Plus for some reason he was being invited to every wedding in Galilee.

When he arrived in Nazareth, he got a warm greeting. They were proud of him. They asked him to be the lector in the synagogue, and he did a nice job. Read that terrific passage in Isaiah, you know, where God says everything will be all right when his anointed one arrives on the scene? People liked that. They were starting to picture a better Nazareth. They were ready to slough off all their troubles, and enjoy the "Age of Aquarius." So when Jesus concluded the reading with a personal note, they loved it: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Next Sunday's Gospel is actually a continuation of this one. It's too bad they got separated, because it's not two stories, it's one.

We will hear next Sunday how the people responded to Jesus' reading in the synagogue. "All [still] spoke well of him, and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth."

...

So far, so good.

So far, of course, it is still a little vague. In general, we have heard, the Lord's anointed one (that's the word "Messiah" in Hebrew, or "Christ" in Greek) is going to bring good news to the poor. What news exactly, we don't know, but it's a positive thing. And he's going to "proclaim" release to the captives, whoever they might be. And he's going to "proclaim" recovery of sight to the blind, which is almost as good as giving them eyesight, except it still sounds like a promise. And he's going to let the oppressed go free, which still needs definition. And "proclaiming" the year of the Lord's favor—which never did get proclaimed in all Israel's history, although it was a super idea, that at the jubilee debts should be forgiven, etc., sounds terrific.

So, it was a promising and quite positive passage Jesus read, short on particulars, but definitely in the right direction.

And when he said "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," that could be taken a few different ways. Was he saying that the *anointing* mentioned in Isaiah was happening before their very eyes, as Jesus stood there? Or was the anointed one someone else, and Jesus was bringing word about that person? By "full-filled" did he mean "what you see *now* is what you get"? Or did fulfilled refer to what was about to happen?

Still, there was a remarkable similarity between their hometown boy's exploits, such as they had heard, and this very promising passage in Isaiah. They were used to things taking a long

time, so maybe the people of Nazareth didn't need a lot more to go on. Just a few free samples, perhaps. A healing or two? Perhaps Jesus could solve some of the land disputes that were going through the courts of Nazareth County? Anyway, Jesus had come home!

They smiled, shook their heads in wonderment. They said, "Can this really be Joseph's son, you know the one I'm talking about?"

So far, so good.

But, then . . .

Why did he have to go and spoil it? Why did Luke have to include the second half of the story, next Sunday's part? It certainly is a lot less positive than the first ten verses.

Jesus clearly meant to provoke them. First, he insinuated that there was something wrong with their desiring a miracle or two; and they hadn't even asked for one yet! Then, he told two stories about a couple times when God's mercy fell *not* on the children of Israel, but a neighbor. The widow of Sidon was fed, but not the widows in Israel. Namaan the Syrian was healed of his leprosy. But lepers in Israel were not so lucky. The story concludes thus:

All in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.

Why didn't he quit while he was ahead?

Because he wasn't!

He knew what they were thinking. They were "thinking local." He was not. They were putting him in a box labeled "our boy--our good luck."

They thought that God was "only so good" and his goodness extended "only so far." [*gesture*] This is a large part of the problem we have in our relationship with God. It is the nature of people to vie for blessings, to define "being blessed" by comparing ourselves with others. For example, a certain football coach pointed out a few weeks back that at the end of this season, there will only be one happy football team. Well, this is true. For Indianapolis to be blessed this afternoon, New York must suffer loss.

But the blessings Jesus was anointed to bring were not going to raise Nazareth up over Capernaum, or Galilee over Judah, or Israel over Achaia. They were, as the Gospel of Luke makes clear time after time, for all the nations.

Nazareth had the potential to ruin such a mission by domesticating Jesus' agenda. He warned them. They didn't like it one little bit. That kind of good news they didn't need, so they tried to kill him.

At the end of the service, when I say "The Lord look favorably upon *you* and give *you* peace," how do you know that is intended for you? More important, how do you know that the Lord *will* look favorably upon you and give you peace? Can you be sure? Do you not doubt it, when

things go wrong? And when everything is going fine, do you think you even need God's blessing?

Jesus warns us not to trust our ethnicity, to answer that question. Our nationality is no guarantee. Even more interesting, you can't tell by your present circumstances—whether you have fallen ill, whether you are poor, whether you have lost someone you love. You can not know whether God loves you by calling to mind the good things you have done; nor can you know that God hates you by remembering very bad things you have done! All those indicators are off, when Jesus addresses you in blessing.

(There are even sillier reasons for thinking that Jesus is blessing you. For example, I think it is really cool that when I slide my credit card in the reader of the gas pump and it asks me to key in my zip code, and I key in 46250, that number is the sign of the cross. How neat! I must be blessed! How ridiculous!)

How can we know what the people of Nazareth so desperately wanted to know, namely, that the words of Isaiah and all the other words of blessing are intended for us, up to and including the benediction at the end of the service today?

Jesus is himself the sign of the universality of God's intention to bless humanity. And you are the means by which that blessing is to reach everyone. The light shines through us, the blessings are poured out through us. That is the meaning of our second reading today, which says that the Spirit of the Lord is not just upon Jesus, but is upon all of us, for the sake of each other and for the sake of the whole world.

That's how good God is. **So-o-o-o good.** That's how far his mercy extends. **So-o-o-o far.** Amen.

