

## Luke 4 Part 2

### Fourth Sunday of the Year (C): Luke 4:21-30

This week's gospel reading is very much the second of a two-parter, the beginning of which we heard last Sunday. In fact, to begin where we did this morning, with Jesus announcing the fulfilment of scripture in the presence of his hearers, breaks Luke's narrative at a wholly inappropriate point. Jesus has survived his wilderness battle with temptation. He has returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, as Luke puts it, and now comes to his home town of Nazareth, joining in the synagogue meeting and reading from the prophet Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."*

Fulfilment, as we discovered last week, is something which depends on the presence of the spirit. It describes the bringing about of God's promises for the salvation of Israel, in the event of Jesus's life death and resurrection but, precisely because of that resurrection, and the fact that Jesus is alive in the church through the presence of the Spirit, fulfilment

is something which does not belong only in the past. It is always being made present in the Christian life.

This morning we must consider the position of Jesus's hearers. They are his familiar neighbours, his local community, the group to which he belongs, at least from their point of view. The passage he reads from Isaiah could hardly be more dramatic. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me: "anointed one" is, of course, another way of saying Christ. But Jesus's anointing here is not that of a royal King so much as that of the Lord's prophetic servant, the one who comes to preach the good news to the poor, to declare liberty to captives and sight to those who are blind.

At this initial point, there is no hostility, no conflict, between Jesus and his audience. When he closes the scroll, the evangelist supplies us with a telling detail: their eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. The expectation is positive, they anticipate something marvellous, and something marvellous is what they get: today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

Now there is something very clever on Luke's part going on here, and it's easy to miss. It relates to the content of Jesus reading from Isaiah, and his pronouncement of its fulfilment. The content of that reading is

the proclamation of the good news to others – it is about speaking and hearing in other words; and as a sign of that good news, it is about those who are blind gaining their sight. Eyes and ears, in other words, are at the forefront. Thus when the reading ends, Luke reminds us that the synagogue members have their eyes fixed on Jesus, and when he speaks to them he tells them that the scripture is fulfilled in their hearing. Eyes and ears once again. If we know our scriptures well enough we will know that those with hardened hearts to whom the prophet Isaiah is first sent are those who listen but don't hear, who look but can't see. Something very similar is going on here. We have the paradox of an audience which is blind and deaf.

That inability to perceive is not at first obvious. They speak well of Jesus, marvelling at his words. He it is who begins the conflict, or so it seems. He knows that they look for signs and miracles: do here what you did in Capernaum. They wish to prescribe the presence of God, to tie it down to signs and wonders on demand, at particular times in particular places. Jesus will have none of it. The presence of the spirit cannot be so circumscribed. Not only will he not “perform on demand” he will alarm his hearers with the announcement that the fulfilling of that scripture, the proclamation of the good news, is not the property of his own people but of the whole world, just as from the whole world will come the people of God to whom that preaching is addressed. He is

a prophet like Elijah and Elisha, called to go beyond the limits of the kingdom to declare the presence of the living God to all who will listen.

The anger of his audience could not be greater. Having tried to control Jesus with their minds, having tried to think him into being the type of messiah, the type of prophet who fits their preconceptions, they now resort to attempting a far more physical control. They grab hold of him, with the intention of lynching him, or rather, of throwing him over the cliff. Having started out astonished at his words and ready to crown him their local hero, they end this section of the story doing their best to do him to death. Once again, he won't be controlled.

This synagogue meeting of Jesus's own people, bears some uncomfortable parallels for the church, that body which is supposed to be defined by the continued fulfilment in the spirit of the presence of Jesus Christ. The Nazareth synagogue was consumed by its rejection of Jesus but we, far worse, are consumed by what we think is our affirmation of him. Circumscribing Jesus, making him into what we want him to be, storing him up as a resource which we draw upon when we feel like it, is something all of us do all of the time. Christian living becomes a part of what we do, not the whole of it, it is another of our pastimes. It's hard to avoid this approach, but heaven knows that we need to try. Seeing the good news of the kingdom coming to fulfilment

is something we can only achieve if we are open to the presence of the Spirit in our lives, if we have the courage to let God speak his word to us, to direct every aspect of what we do and who we are in love for him and for our neighbour. How that plays out for each one of us is impossible to predict. For some it might mean something extraordinarily dramatic, for others something more subtle but equally powerful. Openness to God, as a church, and as individuals, is essential if we genuinely seek to grow in the power of that same spirit.

It will always be tempting to grab hold of Jesus, to make him ours and no-one else's, to control his presence for our own benefit, to protect our fears and our insecurities by limiting him to certain aspects of our lives. But the gospel is clear that attempts to control Jesus, to force our will upon him, are attempts to kill him. And such attempts must always fail. The more fiercely we lay our hands upon him, the more surely he will slip through our fingers, passing through the midst of us, taking himself away from us, and leaving us faced with a choice: remain where we are with nothing but ourselves to worship, or turn and try to follow.