

Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21
3rd Sunday Year C

My subject this morning reminds me of the academic theologian who spent every Christmas in a small remote village and, since he was ordained, was called upon to cover the morning service on Christmas day each year. On the fourth occasion that he had officiated in this capacity, he climbed into the pulpit, looked around the church, and began “this year we come to the fourth word of the first chapter of St John’s gospel”. Half of our gospel reading this morning was the very beginning of Luke:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed.

The first word – in Greek – is “epeideper”, usually translated “since”, or “inasmuch as”. But it’s an odd word. First of all, this is the only time we meet it anywhere in the Greek Bible. Secondly, it’s in the wrong place, because it’s supposed to be what Greek teachers call a post-

positive, or a timid word, a word which cannot come at the beginning of a sentence. Here it does. It usually forms part of a causal construction, a part of a sentence which gives a reason for something we already know. Here, the only thing we know is that Luke is writing – he begins by giving us his reasons. But what is he writing? It must be history of some sort, because by introducing it in this way Luke is self-consciously aping the historians of his day, most of whom also wrote in Greek. Luke’s history is directed at someone important – Theophilus: unfortunately, we’ve very little idea who he was. The purpose Luke sets out, however, is that he may know the truth: in fact the word “assurance” might be better – Luke’s writing will provide this assurance concerning that which Theophilus has been told, it will provide a history of the movement centred on Jesus. But this history is not in any sense ordinary.

The composition and the telling stories has been part of the identity of human communities for as long as anyone is aware. Religious communities, in particular, when they gather for worship, place great stress on the recitation of the stories in which they find the origins of their beliefs and practice. We see this enacted in our Old Testament reading from Nehemiah, and also in the other part of the gospel we heard. The lectionary today has done something remarkable – jump from chapter 1 to chapter 4 in the middle of our gospel reading - but it does so for good reason.

After we heard the prologue, we picked up the story immediately after the account of Jesus's temptations. He returns to Galilee in the power of the Spirit. Remember that little phrase. He then goes into the synagogue in his home town – synagogue not meaning a building but a meeting – and reads a familiar text from Isaiah. In this synagogue scene Luke gives us a dramatic picture: Jesus reads, finishes, rolls up the scroll and the eyes of all are fixed upon him. His response is no less dramatic – today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. What is that scripture? “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me”.

Think again of that prologue: Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us. The use of “have been accomplished” in that translation is not ideal. “Have come to fulfillment” might be preferable - the word is a cognate of the verb to fulfil – but “have been accomplished” does give us the useful sense that someone else has done the accomplishing. Who or what is that something? The answer for Luke is the spirit of the Lord. The events of which he writes, the church whose story he is telling, the community he is seeking to teach, all of these are defined by the presence of the spirit which is the creative presence of God himself. Fulfillment in the Spirit – the bringing about of God's saving acts in the life and history of his people – is the theme of Luke's writing. The very

existence of the church is testimony to that fulfillment, that making present of God's creative, salvific power. His whole justification for writing, that which we already know before he starts, is the work of the spirit in the present life of the Christian community. This is the theological reason why he makes that odd literary decision to begin his whole account with that little word “epeideper” – “since” all this is the case.

The content of Jesus' reading, the prophecy whose fulfillment is Jesus' own ministry, conducted in the power of the spirit, is the dramatic transformation of life and fortune which we have already met in the songs we call the benedictus and the magnificat, in Luke's first chapter. The world is turned on its head. This is, in a sense, a two part sermon, because next week's gospel continues where we left off and so shall I. So as they say in the media, if you want to know more of this story you can “find out next week”. But jump quickly ahead with me and consider Jesus' final words. “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”.

It is the presence of the spirit which enables fulfillment. And fulfillment is something which has happened in history, according to Luke. But it is also something whose effect is ongoing, something which continues to take place as long as the presence of the spirit is known. Your identity

and mine is being defined, at least in part, by our reading and hearing together the same stories, the same scriptures. But what enables those scriptures to be fulfilled, what enables Luke's purpose to come to fruition, is the same now as in the first century: the life giving presence of the spirit. The preaching of the good news to the poor, of liberty to captives, sight to the blind and the gracious favour of the Lord, all these are the ongoing work of God in the church, in the lives of each one of us here today.

Knowing the presence among us of the one who proclaims those words is a privilege granted to you and to me, as we gather to celebrate that presence in word and sacrament, and as we are nourished by Christ and sent out in the power of that same spirit. In this week of prayer for Christian unity, we remember that it is the broken body of Christ which unites us in the eucharist we celebrate. From that brokenness stems what unity the church can claim, because by that body are we empowered in the spirit which alone gives life to the church. We do not come to church in order to stay here, we come in order to be sent, to be apostles, to be the body of Christ, the body of the one who is anointed by the Spirit of the Lord. Every time we offer this sacrifice we might repeat the words of Jesus and pray that today this scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing.