

3rd Sunday Ordinary Time, Cycle C

Last Sunday we began to put on our green liturgical colors again, and today we've added the green on our altar. We haven't put the green banners on the walls because for now we're keeping our wonderful trees up here, so we already have plenty of green in the sanctuary. Most of you probably know that this green is the liturgical color for "Ordinary Time," when our gospels readings are generally sequential, and we usually focus on just one particular gospel during the year.

This gospel for this liturgical year is Luke's gospel, and Luke is a favorite for many people. Luke's gospel is the only one that tells the familiar and well-loved story of Jesus' lowly birth in a manger, visited by shepherds and choirs of angels. Luke gospel alone gives us the stories of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, the story of the rich man and Lazarus, or the story of the ten lepers who are healed but with only the Samaritan leper returning to thank Jesus, that gospel story we hear every Thanksgiving day. Luke's telling of the Passion has significant details that the others do not, for only in Luke does Jesus sweat drops of blood when he agonizes in the garden; and when they come to arrest Jesus and one of his followers strikes out with a sword, only in Luke do we hear that Jesus heals the ear. Only in Luke does Jesus forgive his torturers from the cross where he hangs, and it is only in Luke that Jesus forgives the man we call "the good thief just before they both die.

You can see just from some of these few details that Luke takes pains to remind us how especially key to Jesus' mission are the poor and lowly and forgotten, how necessary it was for Jesus to bring forgiveness to sinners and healing to those who diseased or maimed or disabled in body or spirit.

It should then come as no surprise to us, to hear today's gospel, even though today's gospel was no doubt completely stunning to those who were there.

First, you need to remember the setting of time and place. Today's gospel takes place right near the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. In chapter three of Luke's gospel we hear of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, followed in chapter four by the Holy Spirit leading Jesus out into the desert to be tempted. It is after his time of trial in the desert that we see him in our gospel today as he returns to Galilee – as the scripture puts it, "in the power of the Spirit" -- on the way to his home town of Nazareth. He comes into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stands up to read the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and reads the proclamation we heard just a moment ago:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring glad tidings to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

There was no doubt something in his voice and manner that grabbed the crowd – our scripture says that he rolled the scroll up, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down, and *the eyes of everyone in that synagogue were riveted upon him*. (I wish all of us, me included, could be that attentive to the scriptures!) And then, perhaps after a moment of suspense, Jesus announces his mission on earth with these words:

“Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing!!”

Now, personally – I find that electrifying! I wish I had been there. I’m sure I would have been tempted to follow him on the spot. But -- as we shall see next week... it was too much for the people of Nazareth. They knew his family; they must have grumbled: “How could he be so bold?” They just couldn’t take it, and they ran him out of town – they were even going to throw him off the brow of the hill where the town was built – you can still see that cliff outside of Nazareth today.

So the question for us all today, I think, is quite simple. When our Jesus speaks these words to us, how do we react? If this is an announcement of his mission on earth, do we, today, make this our mission too? Do we?

Just during this last week... we got a day off on Monday, most of us, in honor of the life and death of Martin Luther King Jr. He tried to set people free, didn’t he? And yet in our country African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, and others of color still find themselves statistically with more unemployment, lower incomes, little if any wealth, and you know I could go on further. Structural racism is sadly still alive and well in our land. What did Jesus just say about letting the oppressed go free?

On Tuesday the country watched closely an election in Massachusetts that most observers declared the death (for now) of national health care reform – and whatever your personal political leanings, you should know that our Catholic Church has for years favored a universal health policy, with respect for human life and dignity, access for all, with a special concern for the poor and inclusion of immigrants. What a sadness that our congress couldn’t get it done. What did Jesus just say about glad tidings for the poor?

And since I just mentioned human life and dignity, just last Friday we also observed the 37th anniversary of Roe vs. Wade, the landmark Supreme Court case legalizing abortion in our country; and we can still observe grimly that the right to life of unborn children in our society is still held captive to someone else’s choice. What did Jesus just say about liberty to captives?

I invite you today to pray with me, for “the year of the Lord’s favor” that Jesus announces in our gospel. Yes, life is good, and yes God is so gracious to us. And yes, people do good things; it is particularly heartwarming to see people respond so generously to the tragedy in Haiti. I think Jesus would rejoice in that. But I think we would all agree much remains to be done – in Haiti, of course, and in so much else.

Jesus today announces his mission, and invites us to join him.

Deacon Denny Duffell, January 24, 2010