

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C

I used to think that, because St. Luke was a gentile and not a Jew, his understanding of the Old Testament was not as good as the other three Gospel writers. I believed that Sts. Matthew, Mark and John had a better grasp of how events and persons in the Old Testament foreshadowed the coming of Christ than did St. Luke. After reading and reflecting on the Gospel passages from St. Luke last Sunday and this Sunday, however, I have re-evaluated my previous bias concerning St. Luke's Gospel. The events related in the Gospel readings from last Sunday and this Sunday could only have been written by someone who had a very in-depth knowledge of the Old Testament, regardless of being either a Jew or Gentile.

If you recall last Sunday, Jesus had returned to his hometown of Nazareth, went to the Synagogue on the Sabbath, and read an Old Testament passage from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Chapter 61. Upon concluding the reading, he reminds all in the Synagogue that he himself is the fulfilment of this text.

In doing this, Jesus was right. To understand how he was right, let's break down this passage the Book of Isaiah.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me". Jesus fulfils this passage at his baptism, when the Spirit descended on him (Luke 3:22).

The following passages from Isaiah then describe the anointed one's mission. He was sent, as the Book of Isaiah states, "to bring glad tidings, to proclaim good news to the poor. The poor, the anawim, are the materially poor, but also the spiritually poor to whom Jesus will reach out—like tax collectors and public sinners.

The Isaiah prophecy also proclaims liberty, a verse which points back to a passage in the Book of Leviticus: "You shall proclaim liberty in the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a Jubilee year for you".

A Jubilee year was celebrated every 50th year. On this year all debts would be forgiven, and indentured persons would be freed. Isaiah understood this time of Jubilee as connected to the Messiah. It is also a prophecy concerning Israel's future restoration. The Messiah will come to redeem the enslaved people, ushering in an age of liberty.

The people admired his “gracious words”, but their mood changes quickly. By asking the rhetorical question “Is not this Joseph’s Son?”, they are trying to remind Jesus to stop being so “uppity”. While they admired his words, they could not accept Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah, because his roots were too humble. One could imagine the following going on in their thoughts: “We know you. You may get all high and mighty in the other villages in Galilee, but you grew up here. We know your parents and extended family. Who do you think you are?”

My instinct, in this potentially explosive moment, would be to try to calm things down. Jesus, however, who valued truth over pacification, turns up the heat. He reminds the Nazoreans of the adage “no prophet is accepted in his hometown”. He is identifying himself as a prophet, one who discerns God’s will, then goes and proclaims that will to the people, whether they are accepting of it or not.

Jesus then reminds them that the blessing of the Jubilee is meant for foreigners, the non-Israelites, as well as the Israelites. He illustrates this point by reminding them of the time the Prophet Elijah worked a miracle for a gentile widow in Zarephath, enabling her and her son to survive a famine (1 Kings 17:8-16). Jesus then described another miracle, where the Prophet Elisha heals Naaman the Syrian of his leprosy (2 Kings:5). These miracles foreshadow Jesus’ drawing the gentiles to the worship of the one true God. He even reminds the disciples, at the conclusion of Luke’s Gospel, to proclaim the Good News “to all the nations”. Jesus not only fulfils prophetic texts like Isaiah 61, but also prophetic types like Elijah and Elisha.

The people in the Synagogue, it is noted, “were filled with rage”. The reason behind this rage is that Jesus challenged their understanding of Israel being God’s exclusively chosen people. Although there are several Old Testament passages that describe gentiles as being a part of Good’s plan for salvation, it was expected, because of the gentile’s persecution of the Israelites, that they would experience a coming “day of vindication” from God. Those in the Synagogue did not accept Jesus’ status as a true prophet. They understood him to be, rather, a false prophet, and the penalty for falsely proclaiming oneself to be a prophet is death. They therefore brought him to a cliff to impose on him this penalty.

Since Jesus is a true prophet, he can only die in Jerusalem, so he escapes from them, apparently never to return to Nazareth.

Jesus' proclamation of Isaiah 61 in the Synagogue at Nazareth was the proclamation of his earthly ministries mission statement.

The scripture scholar Pablo T. Gardenz described it this way: "Jesus the Messiah fulfils Scripture, preaches good news to the poor, gives sight to the blind, proclaims liberty to usher in the Jubilee, restores Israel's captives, reaches out to the Gentiles, and finally experiences rejection but escapes, thus foreshadowing his death and resurrection".

In the Year 2000, St. John Paul II led the Church in celebrating the Great Jubilee. Pope Francis then called for an extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy for 2016. The Church's celebration of jubilee years reminds us that the Jubilee proclaimed by Jesus is ongoing. Jesus is still bringing liberty to captives and forgiveness of sins to those who repent and believe in him.