

A history lesson with a surprising ending
Baruch 5.1-9; Canticle 19; Philippians 1.3-11; Luke 3.1-6

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What is it that we come together here to do? Why do we do what we do?

Some people would say that what we do is to cultivate our relationship with God, one on one. As individuals, we come together to hear about what we should do, how we should do it, what we should avoid. It's really about God and me. The Gospel should speak to me and change me. This is what we might call the Protestant approach to the Gospel. [1]

Others would say that what we do is to find out about God's relationship with us as a world, that it's all about God and the world. The Gospel tells us what God is doing with history and the world. This is what we might call the Catholic approach to the Gospel.

At the outset, the Gospel for today seems clearly to come down on the Catholic side: God is clearly Lord of history and of the physical world around. The whole point of the Gospel for today is to show that the preaching of John the Baptist, and eventually that of Jesus, take place in a well-defined place in history and what the implications of that are for the landscape around them.

To start with, Luke gives us 6 names of 6 political figures who will be highly relevant to the story of Jesus that is to follow. These were the "greatest" in their day and in that part of the world in which John and Jesus appeared:

- It will be under the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius, Augustus Caesar's own stepson, that Jesus' entire public ministry will take place.
- It will be under the reign of two of the sons of Herod, called the Great, that Jesus' ministry will take place: one of those sons, called Antipas (after Herod's father), ruler under Roman authority of the region called the Galilee, and the other called Philip, after the father of Alexander the Great, ruler under Roman authority of the Golan Heights and the hillside down past what is today the UN outpost and out on to the plain toward Damascus.
- It will be under the authority of Lysanias, who ruled in the area of what we now call Lebanon, again under Roman authority, that Jesus will venture beyond the land of Israel and encounter those non-Jews, foreigners, the Gentiles, whom his followers will go on to welcome into the Kingdom of God.
- And finally, Jesus will find himself at the end of his life in Jerusalem, in the shadow of the Temple, where Caiaphas is High Priest and his father in law Annas, a powerful figure rules from the shadows. It is there that Jesus will be regularly challenged and ultimately

handed over to his death at the hands of a petty magistrate from Italy named Pontius Pilate. But, though petty, Pilate ruled as if he were all that mattered in Israel.

But, Luke tells us more than simply the context. He tells us what God is going to do to the landscape:

- “a voice bellowing in the wilderness, (saying) ‘Prepare ye the Lord’s way. Make his paths straight. Every valley is going to be filled up, and every mountain and every high place is going to be brought down. Difficult walkways will be made easy, and rugged ones will become flat. Everyone will witness the deliverance that comes from God.’”

Luke thus quotes Isaiah: there is a levelling that is going to happen: the valleys are going to be filled by the mountains that will collapse. The former rugged pathways that made farming the Holy Land impossible will disappear and the land will become one vast plain for cultivation. The land that is now twisted and impassable will be flat, easy to cultivate, and easy to live on.

And that earth-shaking drama that is about to unfold through the preaching of John and Jesus will take place in a particular time and in a particular place, with well-known political figures. This is the history lesson: the shaking of the foundations will happen and it will happen in this setting. The creator God who is also the Lord of history is just about to act. And over the course of this church year, we will hear just how this God does act.

But before then, there is a surprising ending to the history lesson, a hint about what is to come. It is a hint that what is to come will happen not first of all to the land but rather to the “great”, the political figures who people use to define history AND to the little people are usually forgotten in history. What Luke hints at here then is a surprising ending: this drama that is about to unfold is a drama that concerns BOTH the bringing down of centuries old religious structures, the municipal and regional governments, the provincial governments, and the very Empire itself, AND the raising up of individuals who would otherwise have been washed away by the tide of history.

What is my justification for saying this? It is not just the quote of Isaiah that Luke invokes. It is also the context in which he quotes it. It is because of who the figures are that Luke has chosen to mention at the very beginning of this reading and what happens to them. Note: the events that begin to unfold here happened in the 15th year of Tiberius, that is, about 30 AD. Jesus’ ministry may have lasted for 3 years, and so he may have died around 33 AD.

- Tiberius Caesar died a broken man on the 16 March 37 AD, just 7 years after the events that begin to unfold here. Lysanias died the same year.
- Pontius Pilate was sent back to Rome in disgrace one year before that in 36 AD and died in disgrace.
- Herod Antipas died a horrible death in 39 AD, while Philip, a good ruler, died in dishonour the same year that Jesus is understood to have died, 33 AD.

- Annas lived to a ripe old, embittered age, “embittered” partly because he lived to see the line of priests who descended from him preside over the eventual destruction of the Temple and Judaism as Jesus knew it. This included his son-in-law, Caiaphas, who was unceremoniously deposed 3 years after presiding over the trial of Jesus. Caiaphas died a short time later.

Talk about mountains and hills being brought low! At the beginning of his narrative of the public ministry of John and Jesus, Luke makes a very subtle and surprising point about the political context of Jesus’ day: within 10 years of the beginning of John’s ministry, all the leaders who will have been thought to have been the most important people of the day will have been swept away from history, often in disgrace or dishonour. True, so will Jesus have been “swept away” and in the most dishonourable way possible, through a death on a cross; but Jesus was to rise again from the dead only 3 days later.

From that time on, the Gospel of Jesus would live on in the incarnate form of the men and women who followed Jesus and who will now be clothed in the Holy Spirit from the time of Pentecost on. For example, it would take root in the lives of men and women in unlikely places like that Roman military colony of Philippi, a military colony made up of veterans of the Roman civil wars; strong men who had served their country well, but were now seeing it unravel as the “greats” were brought down. It is to this colony that an otherwise historically insignificant Paul will be led by a vision of a man saying “come over and help us”, to give them new hope in an eternal empire, the kingdom of God. Talk about the valleys being raised up!

It is there and elsewhere, throughout the world, that the Gospel will grow quickly, while just as quickly the so-called “great” disappear from history -- or, like Annas, watch as history crumbles around them. And remember: the Gospel will grow quickly as a result of the preaching of the so-called “least”, who will bring the Gospel from nation to nation until the whole earth is filled with the knowledge of God, so that not just Israel could walk the land in safety (as Baruch writes), but so that the whole world could walk “in safety” anywhere! All flesh will see God’s deliverance not because it comes in the name of Tiberius, or Antipas, or Lysanias, or Caiaphas, but in the name of Jesus as borne by those who follow him. In fact, who would even remember the names of the others were it not FOR the name of Jesus!

My friends, as Anglicans, both Protestant AND Catholic, we are well suited to appreciate that the Gospel does come to us as individuals and concern our individual lives AND that the Gospel also enters into history and changes the world. As Anglicans we can say both “God have mercy on me” and “God is Lord of history, setting up and casting down, levelling the ground”. Because the Gospel enters the lives of individuals like you and me who will go forth from here to love and serve the Lord by making Jesus known as Lord not just of our lives but as the Lord and Governor of history, whom we are pleased to serve. And so the drama does start here, in both the narrative of Luke and for our lives!

****FOOTNOTES****

[1]: Writing about John Updike, Cynthia Ozick says “the Protestant idea of God, which nurtured and shaped America (at least until Sept. 11, 2001), is the narrowed Lord of persons, not of hosts; he is not conspicuously the Lord of history” (Cynthia Ozick, “‘The early stories’: Prodigious Updike,” NY Times Sunday Book Review (November 30, 2003), found at <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/30/books/review/30OZICKT.html>).