

## 5 Easter (A)

10 May 2020

*The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.* Luke 4:20

. . . And what a look that must have been too! Think about what they were thinking! This hometown boy, this prophetic upstart, Mary's and Joseph's first-born brat! Where does he come off, taking over the pulpit, showing off, proving he knows his way around a sacred scroll! Big deal!! I remember when he was knee high to a mustard tree! Always running to his mother! His teachers thought him stupid. The rabbi thought him rebellious. He simply scared everybody else!! What can he possibly tell me now that I don't already know?

Let's face it, it must have been a tough audience! And yet this episode from Luke's gospel is one of my favorites. Much of the reason for this has to do, I think, with the way Luke tells the story. What I like especially is that long silence he gives us between the time when Jesus sits down, after having read from Isaiah, and the moment he begins to speak. Talk about a pregnant pause, talk about being able to hear the dust settle! And then there's the silence of all those eyes, riveted on him, silently daring him to impress them with his knowledge.

But instead of a bible study, instead of a list of quotations, instead of impressing them with his knowledge, what does he say? 'Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' In other words, Everything the prophet predicted, everything that you believe you've been waiting for, is here in front of you. All your expectations, all your hopes are embodied in the very one who is speaking to you. All your history, all your faith, from Sinai to Canaan, from David to Solomon, to Babylon and back again 'has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Still, it's not so much his person or even his presence as the long-awaited messiah that Jesus is announcing. Rather, it is the work he is doing, the work he's come to do, that proves his identity. And what is that work, that mission? Isaiah spells it out . . . 'to bring good news to the poor,' to 'proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind.' It is 'to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' In other words, every good thing humanity has ever longed for, every yearning for freedom, every cry for justice, every joy in seeing clearly for the first time all of these universal desires are being gathered up and met and blessed in this place, in this land, on this earth, in this time of God's favor . . . 'in your hearing.'

Now you would think that such a declaration on Jesus' part might have given his fellow townspeople some cause for pride, even rejoicing! After all, this could really put Nazareth on the map! No more of those 'middle of nowhere' jokes! And all of this from a carpenter's son! Are the

Jerusalem papers covering this? You, too, can grow up and become the Messiah!! The possibilities are endless!

But that's not what happens, is it? Oh, at first they all speak well of him. Good speech, all the right talking points. Yet whatever positive impression Jesus might have made is quickly erased by the fact that he will not back up his words with actions. Knowing their motives and, possibly, their designs, he won't do in his hometown the works he has performed elsewhere. So instead of rejoicing that a prophet has risen among them, and more 'a voice and a light to all the nations' they resent him because he will not be THEIR prophet, THEIR messiah, THEIR light, THEIR liberating savior alone. I mean, charity begins at home, right? . . . Family come first . . . Look after your own and let the rest of the world fend for itself. All these old slogans were old in Jesus' time, and were no doubt growled under clenched teeth all the way to that nearby cliff, as Nazareth sought to rid itself of its favorite son. If we can't have him, nobody else will!

The crowd that WAS rejoicing, however, the audience that was all smiles and grateful expectation would have been Luke's first readers, most if not all of them Gentiles. For they would have known that Jesus' sermon in Nazareth was referring to them. They would have known that his defiance in the face of parochial prejudice, and worse, had been for their sake. They would have known that the Lord's favor embraced their lives as well as those of ancient Israel, that Christ's embodiment of the prophet's words meant that they too had a full share in the riches of God's kingdom. What the hometown crowd couldn't see what the hometown crowds of mind and spirit never see is the immensity of those riches and the vastness and reach of that kingdom. Christ came to save the world. Period. Full stop.

At the same time, Luke's audience (Luke's church) would have understood these truths not only by way of Jesus' embodied words but also through his spirit and power embodied in them as they sought to complete the ministry he had begun. They would have known what we know millennia later, that to do the work of Christ in the world is to BE Christ for the world. It is to remember that God' love is limitless and that need and want, oppression and strife do not end at a city's limits or an ocean's edge, but that freedom and justice and health and light are the common hopes, the common goals of all humanity.

My hope is that we are learning again (if we ever understood them before) some of these same truths, these same realities, and that we are growing in understanding of the many ways in which we are connected even in sorrow, even in fear the ways in which we are united to the greater world. It's wretched, of course, to think that it would take a pandemic a deadly planet-infecting virus to make us more aware, more devoted to universal values and dreams. But so be it. If we have failed to find courage and vision in any other way, through any other tragic means, so be it.

Still, such awareness can itself yield a great sense of purpose, even a kind of affirming joy. I was reading recently an email sent to me by Father Paul Beynon, who is the Rector of St. Mary's Church in Braddock, Cornwall, in Great Britain (and, as it turns out, pastor of four other parishes as well!). Among other things, he describes how his churches are dealing with life and ministry during this virus outbreak. Although several people in the district have tested positive and one member of St. Mary's has died as a result, parishioners continue to reach out to the larger community as best they can. These efforts include (by the way) safely collecting and distributing food through their local food bank; making cloth masks so that everyone will be protected; keeping tabs on those who live alone; and streaming services so that all will still feel gathered and blessed and will know the joy in believing. Does that sort of outreach sound vaguely familiar to you? Though three thousand miles away, does that work of Christ's Body sound also like our work, and the work of his faithful followers, and all people of faith, the world over?

Luke writes that 'the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.' I wonder should it be said that the eyes of all the world are fixed on us now perhaps more than ever. And I wonder if those eyes will continue to look to us, not only for knowledge but for freedom and light and peace once this peril has passed. I wonder what kind of embodied love you and I will still be called on to share, by Christ's invitation in this place, on this earth, by the Lord's favor, in our sight and in our hearing. Amen.

Peace,

Fr. Gordon +