

Jesus and His Cultural Change

Jesus is in the synagogue on the Sabbath day at Nazareth. He stood there in the center of all those who knew him. He was a hometown boy, the center of attention that day.

So, when he read from the Isaiah scroll, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor" everyone understood these words to be the words of Isaiah. It is how that prophet from long ago defined his ministry.

When Jesus finished that reading sat down. So, all eyes were on Jesus, waiting for him to begin his teaching. What would he say about this great prophet Isaiah? Would he emphasize the bad news? Israel had sinned and would be taken into captivity by the Babylonians. Or would he emphasize the good news? One day God would restore his people and bring them back from captivity.

Now here's the wonderful twist, the thing that catches everyone off guard. Jesus does neither. He doesn't emphasize the past. He focuses on the present. He doesn't lift up Isaiah as the great role model; Jesus lifts up himself. This is the important point. It's what upsets everybody at the synagogue. It's why everybody was furious with him and drove him out of town. He dared to say that these great words of Isaiah were really about himself. "Today," he said, "this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Messiah is no longer just a future fantasy. Today this Messiah has come. And that Messiah is me – Jesus – Joseph and Mary's son. But Jesus does not stop there. The Messiah, he says, has not just come to save the Jews but also to save the Gentiles, the foreigner, and the enemy. The Messiah has come to save everyone!

This morning let's look at the ministries of Isaiah and Jesus. Why are their ministries so closely tied and why does Jesus describe himself as fulfilling Isaiah's ministry?

1. First, Isaiah's ministry: Who was this man? He lived 700 years before Christ and was a prophet during the reign of King Hezekiah. He spent most of his life in the city of Jerusalem. Now what was his ministry? Let me tell you first that it was not a ministry that any man would be proud to fulfill. His ministry will to proclaim the awful and fearsome judgment that would be brought upon Israel and any nation that defies God. God destroys his people and take them into captivity and slavery. Isaiah called that day? "The Day of The Lord." So next time you hear that phrase remember that it's not a good thing. The day of the Lord is to be feared.

How could God so abandon his people? Isaiah told them they would be destroyed. But he also preached a message of restoration and hope. There would be a year of Jubilee. There would come a time when God would forgive. Listen to Isaiah's words: "The Lord will have compassion on Israel; once again he will choose his people and settle them in their land. And the house of Israel will possess the nations."

Now with this in mind Isaiah tells the people: The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon me to preach good news to the poor...bind up the broken-hearted...proclaim freedom for captives...and release the prisoners from darkness." Do you hear the message? It is God redeeming his people from captivity. Isaiah had a name for this day. He called it "The Year Of The Lord's Favor." This is a good phrase. Next time you hear it be glad.

2. And this is the theme that Jesus draws upon. Let's now take a look at Jesus' Ministry. When Jesus sits down and begins his homily, he applies Isaiah's words to himself. But there is one thing more. Jesus isn't just proclaiming restoration; Jesus intends on fulfilling that restoration. He is going to complete the work that Isaiah left undone.

In the New Testament, a prophet is not someone who forecasts hundreds of thousands of years in the future, but someone who looks at today and says, "This is the way things are." Then the prophet says, "Unless things change this is the way things are going to be." The prophet goes beyond that. The prophet not only says this is the way things are, a prophet will say if you do change; these are the way things could be. There are some in Jesus' day who did not want to change. They were out for profit, the status quo.

Let's stop for a minute here and ask a question. Why does Jesus describe himself as fulfilling Isaiah's ministry? How is Jesus going to finish or complete Isaiah's work? Wasn't the work already fulfilled when Israel was redeemed and brought out of Babylonian captivity? The answer is Yes, in a manner of speaking. They even rebuilt their Temple that had been destroyed in the war.

I think the real reason they tried to kill Jesus was that he said, "Today the scripture is fulfilled in your ears." I am it! Me! The Lord has appointed me, sent me, anointed me; and they couldn't stand that Jesus was one who was willing to stand in the gap between the way things are and the way things can be. Jesus was willing to stand in the Great Divide and to be the bridge over which people could travel from the way things are and the way things could be.

Jesus was careful to show them by scripture that the tension that existed between them was not between the people of Nazareth and Jesus, himself. The tension that existed was between the people of Nazareth and their very own Bible. Their very own Bible told them that they were called of God to be missionaries to the entire world, and that they were to embody, exemplify servanthood. You know we are never so angry as when we are shown by the Bible that we are wrong.

How do you argue with the Bible? You either have to accept the Bible and live by the Bible or reject the Bible, deny the Bible, and respond in anger and violence and that is what they did. Knowing they were wrong, condemned by their own scriptures, they responded in violence and literally attempted to kill Jesus.

It was Jesus immersing himself in scriptures that allowed him to be able to project a vision of hope. A vision! Jesus came and said, "God has sent me. He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor." Jesus announced the arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth. The Kingdom of God was the good news that Jesus was proclaiming. So Good News is not a set of information. It is an experience! It is the possibility to experience God in the person of Jesus. Jesus Christ is the Good News.

So how is Jesus fulfilling it? God said it is through suffering of the servant that salvation in its fullest sense would be realized. Israel, described here as male servant, would have to suffer before he could be redeemed. Jesus re-living/re-experiencing/re-creating the life of Israel. Jesus was far more than the fulfillment of prophecy. He is the fulfillment of our human longing and need. He is the fulfillment of life.

Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of our human longing and our human need. Saint Augustine said that we human beings have a God-shaped void which only God himself can fulfill. Jesus Christ came to our planet as the visible expression of God. He "fits" the void which is essential in us human creatures.

What about you and me? What is the longing in our lives which Christ has filled? "Today," Jesus said, "this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." For you, for me? To what degree are we in the business of fulfilling the scripture in the lives of others? Those of us who have seen the glory of Jesus Christ want to extend the benefit to others. When we read that he came to preach good news to the poor and recovery of sight to the blind, and to proclaim release to the captives, something in us wants to make this happen.

You and I can be agents of the good news. Some of it we do through our part in the work of the church, and some of it we can do personally, one to one, as we extend kindness, love, and deeds of thoughtfulness to people in need. Find something we do well and do it, support it for the glory of God. One single person, one individual, one parish, one group of people can make a difference. Where are you in the text today? Are you up reading the scriptures like Jesus? Or, are you just bystanders listening? Are you one of those who are protesting - "We don't want change" - or are you one of the others saying, "I want to be one of his disciples. I want what he has. I am willing to do whatever it takes. I want to be like him"? They were all there and we are all here. Where are you today? Will you be one to stand in the gap?

In Christ,

Fr Lászlo