

A Heart for the Poor

“To preach good news to the poor”

Reflection 33 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

One day Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth and explained himself to his fellow townspeople in the synagogue. It was quite a moment. It’s recorded in Luke 4:14-21. But to really understand it, it’s helpful, I think, to imagine Jesus in the years that brought him to this moment growing up in Nazareth. Yes, it was a village, rustic, poor, a place of no great repute, but Nazareth was (we may forget) a pretty exciting place for a Jewish boy to grow up. If you climbed to the hilltop above the town and looked out toward the south and west it was as if much of the history of Israel stretched out before you. There was the plain of Esdraelon where Deborah and Barak had fought, where Gideon had won his victory, where Saul had met defeat, and where Josiah had been killed in battle, the last great good king. There was Naboth’s vineyard and the place where Jehu had slaughtered Jezebel. From that hilltop you could see Shunem where Elisha had once lived, and Carmel where Elijah had contested and defeated the prophets of Baal. In the far distance, the Mediterranean glistened.

It was a place alive with stories, and we can imagine Jesus growing up there, and at evening hearing the stories, and hearing the stories of his own birth, and seeing the far-off gaze in his mother’s eyes and wondering, wondering what all this meant, and where he fit in in it all. Imagine him beginning to see the pain, the platoons of Roman soldiers tramping through town, the lines of crosses along the road sides. Imagine him going up to Jerusalem when he was twelve, eyes wide open to the glories of the Temple, beginning to realize that somehow his destiny was tied up in this place. Imagine him beginning to sense his own power – the gift he had! – and all the time wondering what he would be when he grew up. How would he define his mission? What would he take on as his life task? Imagine him standing one day for the last time in the doorway of the carpenter’s shop, remembering Joseph, all the great times, all the hard work, running his hands one last time over the well-worn tools, tracing his foot through the sawdust one last time, realizing that he was now leaving behind everything familiar and comfortable – to do what? How did he understand his life story, his calling, his mission, his life task?

And then one day he returns to his hometown synagogue, and turns to a passage in the prophet Isaiah, and defines his mission! He sets out what he intends to do and what those who really follow him will do. And for this reason the writer Luke gives this moment central prominence in his gospel. It serves as Jesus’ keynote address in Luke’s gospel just as the Sermon on the Mount is his keynote address in the Gospel of Matthew. We know that this story has special significance for Luke because he breaks out of chronological sequence, and takes an event that Matthew and Mark place later in Jesus’ ministry (Matthew 13:53-58; Mark 6:1-6) and tells it first.

This is the first thing Luke wants you to know about Jesus’ ministry. He’s told about his birth, and infancy, and his baptism and temptations. And now Luke turns to describe Jesus’ sense of himself and his mission. And this is the story he leads out with because it is here in his hometown synagogue that Jesus defines his mission, and Luke wants his

readers to know what this mission is, so that as disciples of Jesus, as followers of Jesus, we will know the mission for our own lives.

So there in his hometown synagogue, as he seeks to explain himself to his own townsfolk, the people he's known and who've known him all his life, how does Jesus define his mission? He's there in the synagogue. He's asked to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah is given him. So he unrolls the scroll and looks for a particular text. What text will he choose? He had some options. He could have chosen a text glorifying God (e.g., Isaiah 42:8, "I am the Lord; that is my name!"). He could have chosen a text condemning idolatry or immorality. He could have chosen a text proving that the Pharisees were right and the Sadducees were wrong, or that the Jews were right, and the Gentiles wrong. He could have chosen one of the prophecies against the nations, and used it somehow to call down vengeance on Rome and oppressors everywhere.

But the text he chooses is Isaiah 61:1-2, which Luke cites a little loosely from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of Hebrew scripture: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. [He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted.] He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the captives and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." In other words, he inaugurates a future we can trust; and to all who struggle to trust the future, the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed, he says, "You can. You can trust the future. God will save. God will heal. God will liberate you."

So that is his mission. That is the mission he chooses: to establish a future we can trust, to show us the way to that future, how we might join with him in its creation and establishment. And he alludes to the Year of Jubilee (described in Leviticus 25), the year of the Lord's favor, every fiftieth year, when a trumpet sounded on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, and liberty was proclaimed throughout the land, and slaves were freed, debts were canceled, and property was returned to the family that owned it fifty years before, so that no one would forget that the land is God's (as sure as the air and the sea) and we are only his tenants.

Jesus is saying that he comes to usher in freedom, emancipation, amnesty, liberation for all, a future that leaves no one behind, a future for all, and so for this reason, and only for this reason, a future that all can trust. And it begins with preaching good news to specifically the poor.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week.