

### **TODAY IN YOUR HEARING**

Luke 4:14-21 & 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

This morning the gospel writer Luke gives us an essential snapshot to help us understand Jesus' ministry. Each of the 4 Gospel writers gives us a different snapshot of the start of Jesus' ministry. Matthew shows Jesus as the new lawgiver with the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. Mark gives us a composite of Jesus' powerful ministry as a healer, exorcist and teacher. Last week we saw John's opening snapshot in the story of Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. The Gospel writers are not offering contradictory first acts of Jesus. Rather, each Gospel writer is setting the stage by taking a story (a snapshot) of Jesus' ministry that shows us a distinct perspective on that ministry. None of them claim their opening snapshot was the first act Jesus took. It's the first act they choose to show us.

Luke is the Gospel most concerned for the marginalized. Simple shepherds, women, Greeks, Samaritans, Romans (all who were Gentiles), a Syro-Phoenecian, tax collectors – people on the fringes of society – are given considerable space and often voice in Luke's narrative. Luke's opening snapshot of Jesus' sermon in his home-town synagogue declares from the outset the nature of Jesus' ministry. Jesus' very life and presence is the declaration of good news, of liberation, the overturning of oppression, of healing and release.

In Luke's opening snapshot of Jesus' ministry we see him invited to read the scripture in his hometown synagogue, an important honor. He is given the scroll from the prophet Isaiah and selects the passage (Isaiah 61:1-2) and begins to read. It's interesting to note that Jesus skips part of a verse. He leaves out the proclamation of "*a day of vengeance of our God;*" apparently Jesus (or Luke) did not want us to associate vengeance with Jesus' ministry. When he completes the reading Jesus sits down. In the synagogue the rabbi or teacher would not stand but sit to teach. Every eye was fixed on him and he made the startling declaration, "*today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*"

What did Jesus mean by "*today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing?*" Did he mean that they – the people in his home town synagogue – were the *poor* to whom he brought good news and thus he fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy? Or did he mean that he would personally fulfill all those messianic hopes for a savior who would bring release to captives, overturn oppression, bring healing, give sight to the blind, and bring the overturning (the forgiving) of debts as in the year of Jubilee? I think he meant both. He declared good news to his neighbors in Nazareth and he – in his ministry – was the good news. Some biblical historians suggest that the very year in which Jesus began his ministry (26-27 CE) was the biblical year of Jubilee, the 50<sup>th</sup> year of release from debt, servitude and bondage, and that Jesus declared in himself the gift of Jubilee for God's people.

The setting of Jesus' home town synagogue is a powerful one in which to see him begin his ministry. At first Jesus' words were well received, but we'll hear the rest of the reaction in the continuation of the story in next week's gospel.

I like to try and picture Jesus offering this same declaration of ministry to different audiences in different settings. How would Jesus apply this message from Isaiah 61 about being anointed to bring good news to the poor, release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, overturning of oppression, to a jail? How about to a corporate board room, or a hospital, or the halls of government? Would his declaration that God was acting to overturn established orders, to bring justice and freedom and release for those most oppressed and shackled be received by those who heard it as good news or fearful news?

What if Jesus were to declare these same words on the cracked streets of Port au Prince, Haiti, still filled with the rubble of collapsed building and reeking with the stench of death? I think his words would ring with hope in the midst of despair. The poor, the broken, the hurt, the lost, the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless: all would long to hear for the good news Jesus proclaims. Ah, but would they believe him? And how about you and me? Do we believe him? Do we believe that Jesus' words declared over the broken and devastated city of Port au Prince represent good news that can make a difference? Are they in any way today still being fulfilled in our hearing?

An old story is told of a visitor to Calcutta, India overwhelmed by the terrible poverty he witnessed, especially seeing the suffering of starving children. Angry and despairing he yelled at God wondering where God was, how God could allow such terrible suffering, especially the suffering of innocent children. Angry and despairing he fell asleep, but awoke suddenly from a dream to the realization that in those very starving children God was yelling at him.

Is God not yelling at us in the heart-wrenching pictures of suffering we are witnessing day after day from Haiti? Did Jesus himself not tell us that as we help or fail to help the least of them, so we are treating him? (Matthew 25:40) Paul taught us in our Epistle lesson today that we collectively are the Body of Christ in the world. St. Theresa of Avila summarized that passage when she wrote in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that "*Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. You are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes. You are his Body.*"

I have been praying fervently for the people of Haiti. I imagine you have been praying fervently too. Seeing all the devastation I sometimes find myself praying selfishly for protection for my family and myself. You may be also. We ask lots of prayers, sometimes selfish prayers, sometimes desperate prayers, for ourselves and our loved ones. Of course, there were probably millions of people in Haiti offering similar prayers when the earthquake struck. Countless thousands are praying desperately right now for help just with the basic necessities of life. How does God answer our prayers? I am reminded of a poem by Claudia Minden Weisz, *And God Said, "No."* (Copyright, 1980)

*I asked God to take away my pride,  
And God said, "No."  
He said it is not for Him to take away,  
but for me to give up.*

*I asked God to make my handicapped child whole,  
And God said, "No."  
He said her spirit is whole,  
her body is only temporary.*

*I asked God to grant me patience,  
And God said, "No."  
He said that patience is a product of tribulation,  
it isn't granted, it's earned.*

*I asked God to give me happiness,  
And God said, "No."  
He said He gives blessings,  
happiness is up to me.*

*I asked God to spare me pain,  
And God said, "No."  
He said, "Suffering draws you apart from worldly  
cares and brings you closer to Me.*

*I asked God to make my spirit grow,  
And God said, "No."  
He said I must grow on my own,  
but He will prune me to make me fruitful.*

*I asked God to help me love others,  
as much as He loves me.  
And God said,  
"Ah, finally you have the idea."*

God asks us to be a key part of the action of our prayers as well as part of the action of the desperate prayers of others. He invites us today to be a key part of the action of his proclamation of good news, a proclamation he first made in his home town synagogue in Nazareth of Galilee:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The continuation of the reading from that scroll in Isaiah 61 verses 3-4 also speak volumes.*

*(The Spirit of the Lord is upon me) to provide for those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.*

Today, yet again, may that potent scripture find fulfillment in our hearing and in our acting as Christ's Body in the world. **Amen.**