

Sermon for the Third Sunday after Epiphany

Readings: Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, 8–10; 1 Corinthians 12:12–31 & Luke 4:14–21

In today's gospel passage, we hear Luke's account of the story of Jesus ministering in his home town of Nazareth. In the versions presented by the gospels of Mark and Matthew, Jesus comes to Nazareth after having ministered for quite sometime elsewhere in Galilee. Both Mark and Matthew record many instances of Jesus performing healing and miracles prior to him coming to Nazareth, but Luke mentions only that following his baptism by John the Baptist, and his temptation by Satan in the wilderness, Jesus returned to Galilee where he taught in the synagogues, and word about him spread throughout the surrounding region. Luke provides no details of anything that Jesus might have done prior to coming to his hometown.

What Luke is basically doing in this story is officially "swearing in" Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. Through the events depicted in the previous three chapters of his gospel – such as the visit of the angel Gabriel to both Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, the appearance of an angel to the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem, the birth and naming of John the Baptist, the birth of Jesus, and his subsequent presentation as a baby in the Temple, and then Jesus teaching in the Temple as a 12 year old – Luke has given his readers pointers to the fact that Jesus is the Messiah, and not only that, but that he is also the Son of God. But now, Luke confirms it.

The Hebrew word *Masiah* (which is translated in Greek as *Christos* or Christ) means 'anointed one', that is, the anointed one of God. Luke tells us that at his baptism by John in the Jordan, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form "like a dove". Luke also tells us that then, "full of the Holy Spirit", Jesus was "tempted by the devil", following which, again "filled with the power of the Spirit", Jesus returned to Galilee and began to teach in the synagogues. Being full of the Holy Spirit is verification that Jesus is the Messiah.

To confirm it beyond any doubt, Luke then tells us that Jesus went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom, therefore highlighting that Jesus was a devout Jew, and that he then stood up to read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. In those days, the Jewish scriptures were written on papyrus scrolls, and Jesus has been handed a scroll of what we now know as the Book of Isaiah.

It is significant that Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah, because Isaiah was more associated with the Messiah than any other prophet in ancient Israel's history. The passage that Jesus reads from Isaiah is 61:1–2, which begins with the words, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . ." Luke has already told his readers that Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit, so now hearing these words from Isaiah, they would easily recognise that Jesus is the Messiah that Isaiah had prophesied about.

And where the Messiah in Isaiah's prophecy talks of proclaiming release to the captives, which was a reference to the Jews who had been exiled in Babylon, Jesus is referring to those who are captives to sin. Jesus has come to release them from the power of sin. In

this passage, Luke attributes to Jesus another verse from Isaiah (58:6) which talks of releasing people from oppression. And when we look at the notion of “release” in the context of the quote from Isaiah – “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” – it takes on even greater significance.

The phrase “year of the Lord’s favour” is connected with two customs in Israel’s Torah. According to Deuteronomy 15:1–18, in the seventh or sabbatical year, land was to be left uncultivated, all debts were to be cancelled, and individuals or families had to be released from the bonds of slavery. Leviticus 25 set out that Israel must celebrate the fiftieth, or jubilee, year as a year of release, where not only were individuals or families released from slavery, but where any land, which may have been lost by families as a result of hardship, had to be returned to its original owners.

According to Luke, Jesus told those listening to him in the Temple that these prophecies of Isaiah had been fulfilled in their hearing. Jesus was really telling them that not only were they to be released from their captivity to sin through him, but through him they were also to be recipients of God’s promise of salvation to the people of Israel.

The Hebrew Scriptures, and specifically in this case several prophecies from the book of Isaiah, spoke truthfully to the people of Jesus’ day hundreds of years after they were written. In the case of the New Testament, and especially this morning’s passage from the Gospel of Luke, how might that speak truthfully to us today, more than two thousand years later?

Jesus told those listening to him in the Temple that they had been released from captivity to sin. By his death and resurrection, Jesus has released us from the power of sin. We are no longer under the control of sin. Through his teaching, we are at liberty to choose the path that we want to follow; the path of freedom that comes from living the right way, or the path of captivity that comes from living in a way that we know is not right.

And by the grace of God, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we too are recipients of God’s salvation. And all that we are required to do, is to open our hearts and receive it.