

Reflection: Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Today's gospel presents us with Jesus' first act of public ministry, described for us in Luke's gospel. Following his river baptism, his wilderness fast and temptation, Jesus returns to his home country, Galilee.

Reports about him have been spreading through the population, probably the result of his healing miracles and his synagogue teaching.

So when he comes back home, it's quite a big day in the synagogue. Everybody's there, eager to hear the local boy who's making such a name for himself.

So Jesus returns to the Nazareth synagogue of his youth, where he is asked to read the lesson from the prophets. There is no lectionary to consult to determine this reading; the choice is up to him. Nor is there a book to flip through. Instead, a bulky scroll is brought to him and placed upon the lectern.

Jesus didn't unroll the scroll haphazardly. He opened it to a particular place, knowing that Isaiah spoke to God's people when they were exiled, when Israel needed to hear a word of promise, not despair, and be given a word of hope that would serve to keep their faith alive.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian, who defied Hitler and the unspeakable terror he caused, rightly said that "the essence of optimism is that it takes no account of the present, but it is a source of inspiration, of vitality and hope where others have resigned; it enables a man to hold his head high, to claim the future for himself and not to abandon it to his enemy."

So often we make the faith we proclaim too complicated. We use lots of words, many of which cause resentment and diminish hope. We do this in order to defend positions that have more to do with personal preferences, with ego, than the basic truth of the gospel. Words which do more harm than good.

By accident, a fellow wandered into a Quaker meeting. No one was saying anything. It was quiet. Everyone was sitting there listening. Silence. He sat a while. He did not know what

was happening. Finally, he gathered up the courage and he nudged the guy sitting near him and said, "Pardon me. When does the service begin?" And the man responded, "When we leave."

There was no lengthy message by Jesus in the synagogue...only a concise affirmation of God's wish for all humanity. And a reminder of the hope given in these words of old, revitalized through the presence of Christ.

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

This is not a proclamation seeped in arrogance. It points to the enduring truth of the one we call Savior and Lord--who he was and how he lived; and if it is our intent to be more like Jesus, then we must make what Jesus said shape who we are and what we do.

And its equally important to note that when Jesus was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, he opened it to the place where it says, "...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."

A woman in Nicaragua gets eleven cents for sewing together a pair of blue jeans that are sold by an American company for \$65.00. This same company made 566 million dollars in profits on those jeans in one year. And this story is repeated worldwide. Since the 1970's, when everyone's income was decreasing, the world's wealthiest one percent, saw their income grow by 250 percent. It is greed, it is systemic, it is global, and it is growing.

Jesus takes these words from the prophet Isaiah as his mission statement, and he is not content to leave it as only a string of high-sounding words. Everything that follows in his life, as presented to us in the gospel, amounts to the living out of the prophecy he claims for himself that Sabbath morning in Nazareth.

He keeps doing these things every chance he gets, every time he turns around, until finally it kills him. Some people welcome what Jesus does, but others do not because it upsets their unfair advantage, questions their complacency, and pushes them to recognize their addictions to wealth.

Jesus read the old words from Isaiah and claimed them for his own. We can do the same. We can bring hope to the those who have lost hope, we can continue the mission statement of Christ, fulfilled in our hearing.

Let us pray...

**Perfect Light of revelation,
as you shone in the life of Jesus,
whose epiphany we celebrate,
so shine in us and through us,
that we may become beacons of truth and compassion,
enlightening all creation with deeds of justice and hope.
Amen.**