

Good News to the Poor

In the name of him who is the sum, substance, and fulfillment of all Scripture, dear friends in Christ: Did you notice the interesting contrast between this morning's Old Testament and Gospel readings? In the Gospel we've got Jesus in the synagogue at his home town of Nazareth. He's leading the Sabbath worship service. He stands up to read a section of Scripture – just six little lines – and then he sits down to preach what has got to be the shortest sermon in history: "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." That's it. A very short time later, after some brief and heated discussion, the angry congregation is trying to throw Jesus off a cliff.

Now compare that unhappy ending to the Old Testament lesson. There we have Ezra the scribe leading a worship service. He has as his text what's called the Book of the Law of Moses, which means the entire first five books of the Bible. He spends from early morning until midday – at least six hours altogether – alternately reading passages from the Bible and then explaining what they mean. That is to say he was preaching a sort of rambling sermon of continuous commentary between the various readings. The congregation stands there listening to him for half a day (they didn't sit for worship in those days and certainly not in padded pews). And as they listen, they are overcome with emotion and moved to tears by what they hear. But then they are told to cheer up and be filled with the joy of the Lord. Go home. Celebrate. Have a great big feast, which they do.

Well, you don't need to be a genius to figure it out: the combined moral of these two stories couldn't be any more clear, could it? In order to affect you more deeply with the power of God's Word and give you cause to celebrate and be glad every week, and at the same time guarantee my own personal safety and well-being, *I need to preach longer sermons*. I wouldn't have thought that would be the case; but there it is: the evidence is right before you. No? ... Okay, I'm prepared to admit that maybe it's not the comparative length of the sermons that accounts for the difference in the responses of these two congregations to what they heard. It could be (and I'm just saying *maybe* here) that I've focused on the wrong detail and drawn the wrong conclusion. But if so, how shall we account for the difference? Why is one group changed radically for the better by their time spent listening to an exposition of God's Word while the other is turned into an angry, Christ-hating lynch mob?

Your first guess might have something to do with the content of what the two groups heard. Maybe one group heard nothing but good news and the other a message filled with threats and insults. That might account for the way they responded—but I don't think so. I mean look: the people mentioned in the passage from Nehemiah were weeping and mourning over the message they heard. That means that they were likely hearing a devastating message of Law. They were hearing about how they had failed to keep God's commands and they were feeling bad about themselves and their sins. Usually people don't like their sins exposed. They get angry and defensive; but these are the people that we're told went home happy. Jesus, on the other hand, delivers a message of pure Gospel. He speaks of good news for the poor, release for the prisoners, and sight for the blind. He says he's come to declare the year of the Lord's favor. That's all good stuff. It ought to make people happy to hear it – and especially to hear Jesus say that he'd come to fulfill all these things. But no, it's the crowd listening to this good news that becomes violent. So it doesn't seem to be the difference in the content of the messages that accounts for the starkly divergent ways way the people responded because their behavior is exactly opposite of what you'd expect.

Well then, if that's not it, another guess might have something to do with the comparative speaking skills of the preachers; but here again, I think we'd be barking up the wrong tree. I mean sure, Ezra was a probably a fine preacher, maybe even one of the best; but I doubt that he could have held a candle to Jesus. Besides, the Gospel lesson clearly states that the congregation in Nazareth marveled at the gracious words coming from the mouth of Jesus. They were very impressed with him even to the point of astonishment: "Here Jesus grew up right here among us and we never knew what a fine preacher he was. This is amazing!"

So, it doesn't seem to be *what* the congregations heard nor *how* it was told to them that is responsible for transforming one congregation into a nest of angry hornets and the other into a rejoicing throng of God's saints. And for argument's sake, we're still saying that it had nothing to do with the comparative lengths of the sermons (though I personally remain unconvinced. I'm certain that a six-hour sermon would make you all so happy you just couldn't stand it. Really, I'm sure you couldn't stand it). But anyway, look: if it's not the message, or the message length, or the messenger that made such a difference, what could it be? Well, what else is left?

Could it be that the difference is in the congregations themselves? At first glance it would appear not, since both groups are composed entirely of Jewish believers, and it's probably safe to assume that in both cases we're dealing with a typical cross section of their society. But if we dig a little deeper, we'll see there is indeed quite a bit of difference in their circumstances and recent experiences – and more importantly, in the way they see themselves. It's in this, I think we will discover, in the way that the individuals that comprise these two groups perceive themselves, their needs, and the purposes for which they have gathered that makes all the difference in the world.

The people in the congregation mentioned in the reading from Nehemiah were mostly Jews who had only recently returned from the exile in Babylon. Their parents, grandparents, and even great-grandparents had belonged to the generations that in a spiritual sense had completely fumbled the ball. They had freely mixed the worship of the Lord with the worship of various idols. They had turned their backs on the Lord's commands and were engaged in every evil and vice you can imagine – and even a few that you probably can't imagine. After many years of trying to call them to repentance through the prophets, the Lord finally gave up on them. He had the Babylonians come take away hostages, thousands of them. They were taken to Babylon and forced to resettle in what amounted to ancient concentration camps. This happened twice; once in 604 BC and then again in 597 BC. These were severe punishments the Lord inflicted upon them in hopes of turning his people around; but still the people in Jerusalem refused to return to the Lord. So, in 586 BC the Lord let the hammer fall. He had the city of Jerusalem destroyed and all of its inhabitants either killed or sold into slavery.

All that remained of the Jewish nation were those captives taken in the years before. They languished in Babylon in relative poverty and oppression for seventy years: a people without a country and without a hope in the world. All they possessed of the Promised Land were stories. The old folks would tell of the glories of Jerusalem and God's Temple there, speaking of it with intense longing and tears in their eyes. So, for the people who were born and grew up there in the exile, all they ever knew was their present pathetic circumstances. Any talk of God's promises and their homeland was at best a distant dream.

But that changed all of a sudden. The once mighty empire of Babylon fell to the Persians; and the Persian king, in what was one of the most remarkable decisions in history, allowed the Jewish exiles to go home. He even supported their efforts to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and the Temple of God within it. For the people coming out of exile it seemed too good to be true – but it was. They returned in waves, overcoming great obstacles and opposition, they managed to restore their country and raise the city of Jerusalem from its ashes. In the days of Nehemiah, they rebuilt the city wall thus providing protection for the city's vulnerable population. Altogether it was like their wildest dreams come true – and they knew who to thank for it. They recognized the Lord's mighty hand in all of these things, and they understood in the very core of their beings that the Lord is a God who keeps his promises and who wants to bless his faithful people.

So now, as this group gathered to hear the reading of God's Word and its explanation, they did so with an overwhelming sense of humility and appreciation. They had known poverty, hunger, weakness, and captivity. Now they were free, well fed, strong, and prosperous. And it's important to understand that they had been deprived in a spiritual sense as well – unable to fulfill the rich and meaningful rites of worship and the festivals the Lord had prescribed for them ... until now, that is. And so it was with a hunger to learn and know what God had to say that they listened and heard about what they had been neglecting. They heard too how far they were from living in ways that the Lord had commanded, and this cut them to the heart. That's why they began to weep and mourn as God's Word was explained to them. And it's why Ezra

had to tell them, “No, this is good. It’s a day to celebrate. The Lord is speaking to us again and listening to him and walking in his ways we will know his forgiveness, his peace, and his joy.” For them God’s Word was a living treasure, and they could see it being fulfilled in their lives.

But fast forward now some five hundred years to the congregation that Jesus is addressing. Here the sense of wonder at hearing the Word of God has long ago expired. They know the stories very well; but they’re ancient history now. They are a record of what God did with their people once upon a time. In fact, there’s a sense of smug superiority and over familiarity with the Scriptures. They have them down cold—and that’s a good way to say it: *cold*. They aren’t so much a living treasure as they are just worn out old words on ancient paper. The people in the congregation talk about them and argue about them because that’s what’s expected; but it’s a mechanical, lifeless sort of thing. They outwardly follow the commands of God because that’s what they do as Jews. But the meaning of the words and the power behind them don’t penetrate. They roll off them like water off a freshly waxed car. “The Lord acted in past; not now. But that’s okay; because we’ve got everything under control. We’ve never really known poverty, oppression, weakness, or captivity – which is proof enough that the Lord is happy with us just the way we are. All we have to do is maintain the status quo.”

Now Jesus gets up to speak. He reads to them the passage from Isaiah about the Lord’s Anointed proclaiming good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, sight to the blind, and so on. Then he sits down and says, “That’s talking about me. That’s what I have come to do.” And the implication is “I’ve come to do those things for you.”

Well, they’ve heard the stories about his going around teaching and healing people in the cities and towns of Galilee – that’s probably why they gave him the opportunity to speak on this day; but this is too much for them. “What are you saying, Jesus? Are you saying that we are poor, blind, captives who need some kind of help from you? You’ve got a lot of nerve. You forget that we know very well you grew up here.” And what I want you to see here is that just as they have a sense of over familiarity with the Scriptures, that “Yeah, yeah, yeah, we’ve heard it all before”, they have the same general feeling toward Jesus. But more importantly, they have no expectations of either, and that’s because they have no sense of their spiritual needs.

And so, Jesus reminds them of two stories from their history that they knew very well about times when God’s people had rejected his prophets, the men the Lord had sent to proclaim his Word. In both cases God’s own people felt that they didn’t need to hear any more of what God had to say. They had everything under control. Life was good. Or so they thought. In truth, their attitude was the same as that of the church at Laodicea mentioned in the book of Revelation. There Jesus says, “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not know that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.” So, because God’s own people felt they didn’t need to hear what he had to say, he sent the prophets to people who would appreciate it: two Gentiles, one a starving widow and the other a high ranking commander in an enemy army. These received God’s grace, healing, provision, and forgiveness when his own people had turned up their noses at the gifts of God that come through his Word. Jesus reminds the people of his hometown of these stories as a warning to them. The implication is that if they too reject the gifts of God he’s come to offer, they too will lose out and the gifts will go to others. They find that offensive; so much so that they try to kill him. But he just walks away and leaves them. And that has got to be one of the saddest sentences in the Scripture.

Let it not be that we make the same mistake. A short while ago you sang, “Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind”. You said that you’d come here to Jesus, the Lamb of God, for “riches, sight, and healing of the mind”. Let me ask you, did you mean it? Did you really have the expectation that Jesus would do that for you today? Or were you just mouthing the familiar words to an old and lifeless hymn? I could ask the same thing about the general confession of sins earlier in this service. You said, “I am by nature sinful and unclean”. You said that you had offended God by your sins and justly deserved his punishment. You asked for his forgiveness in Christ Jesus who was given as the atoning sacrifice on the cross, and you asked for his grace and power to delight in the will of God and to walk in his ways. Did you mean it? Or was it simply a mechanical repetition of overly familiar phrases? Did you have any real expectation that Jesus who is

here with us by his Word would actually grant your request, set you free, and empower you to live to God's glory?

What these contrasting readings we have before us show so clearly is that the difference between a positive, life-changing worship experience and a fruitless, negative one hasn't got so much to do with the skill of the preacher or the length of his message, nor does it have a lot to do with the content of the message, provided, of course, that it is God's Word rightly explained. The biggest difference has to do with you and how you see yourself and your needs. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for those who understand that they are in a spiritual sense poor, wretched, and blind. It is power and joy for those who see themselves as rescued and redeemed captives, but just an empty drill of religious duty for those who imagine that they are well fed, rich in Spirit, completely enlightened, and that they have everything in their lives under control.

Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor." May he give us the grace to know and feel our desperate spiritual poverty whenever and as often as we come to worship, so that we may rejoice upon hearing his message: "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!