

“Today this Scripture Is Fulfilled in Your Ears”

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: The air was charged with excitement in the synagogue that Sabbath morning. For the past several months reports had been filtering back to Nazareth about one of their own: Jesus, the eldest son of Joseph the carpenter, and how he's become something of an overnight sensation. The townsfolk have always known that he was a bit *different*; but different in a good way. No one could imagine anyone saying anything bad about him. For the past thirty years he's been the ideal neighbor. They all agree that he's hard working, reliable, honest, always ready to lend a hand, and gladly willing to contribute to those in need. To be sure, many have said how much they miss him since he went away some five or six months ago. He'd gone, like so many others, to where John was baptizing down by the Jordan. But he didn't come back like the rest did. As a matter of fact, no one knows where he went after he was baptized; almost seems like he fell off the face of the earth for about a month and a half. And then when he did show up again, he started going all around Galilee teaching in the synagogues, gathering disciples to himself, and – if you can believe it – performing miracles. They say he's casting out demons and healing people from diseases and all kinds of injuries. And this week he's come home to where he was raised. The whole town is crowding the synagogue to see for themselves what everybody else is talking about.

The service proceeds as usual. There's the call to worship. The congregation sings a psalm or two. The synagogue leader recites the prayer of the day. And then Jesus approaches the lectern to read a passage of Scripture. The worship assistant hands him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus unrolls it almost to the end. It's a long scroll, so it takes some time – and all the while the suspense is building. Everyone is wondering, what's he looking for? What's he going to read? At length Jesus finds his place and he begins: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim pardon to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”*

The congregation is duly impressed. The voice of Jesus is resonant and authoritative. He sounds like a rehearsed and well-studied rabbi – even though everyone knows he's only worked as a carpenter and has never had any formal religious training beyond what he had in preparation for his Bar Mitzvah, which is roughly equivalent to what we do for Confirmation. Even more remarkable to the congregation is the text Jesus selected. They all know that it refers to the Christ, that through the prophet Isaiah these are words the Christ is speaking. It's explicit. Where it says, “The Lord ... has *anointed* me”, that's the word for Christ because Christ means the Anointed One.

But now Jesus has taken the preacher's seat. Apparently we do things backwards. In those days the preacher sat and the congregation stood for the sermon (actually, they stood for the entire service). Anyway, if the air was charged with excitement before, now it's positively sizzling with high voltage energy. Every eye is on Jesus. Every ear intently tuned to hear what he will say.

Jesus delays just long enough for the expectation to become almost unbearable, and then he opens his mouth to deliver what has the potential to be the shortest sermon in religious history: “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your ears.”

The congregation responds at first with stunned silence. On one level, these are words that every Israelite longed to hear. If what Jesus said were true, then it means the messianic age has begun, that the Lord was now going to fulfill his long standing promises and redeem his people. It's wonderful. It's the best news ever. Everyone's spirit is lifted up ... and then turns suddenly downward again as cold reasoning sets in. Wait. This is Jesus speaking, our Jesus, Joseph's son. He's the guy who until a few months ago lived down the street. We watched him grow up. We went to the same grammar school. He made the cupboard in our kitchen. He replaced the roof on the neighbor's house. He's a common carpenter. He's one of us. He can't possibly be the Christ.

What had begun so sweetly quickly turns sour. Angry murmuring breaks out among the congregation as the audacity of Jesus' words finally sinks in. In response, Jesus says, "Doubtless you will quote me this proverb: 'Physician, heal yourself.'" The idea is that no one would want to go to a doctor who couldn't treat his own ailments. If you are what you say you are, prove it. This is why Jesus expects they will want to see him perform miracles like they've heard that he did at Capernaum.

But Jesus knows that a faith based on seeing miracles is no faith at all. Faith is trust in things that are not seen. And this is the problem: they are unwilling to believe truths of God they have already heard. And so Jesus attacks their lack of faith. "Truly I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown." He follows up with two well known examples from Israel's history. Both Elijah and Elisha were sent by God to preach repentance to the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in a time when they had turned from the Lord and were worshipping idols. Both of these legitimate prophets were rejected by their countrymen. And in both cases, the people who ended up benefiting from their ministries were not Israelites, but pagan Gentiles. Elijah went to a Sidonian widow and stayed with her. And while he did, she and her family were kept alive through a terrible three and a half year drought by a miraculous flour jar and flask of oil that never ran out of supply. Likewise Elisha cured of the dread disease of leprosy not any Israelite, but Naaman the Syrian general – an enemy of Israel.

Some truths are a bit too inconvenient, though. Being reminded that God's people have a long history of rejecting his true prophets, and how the Lord responds by saying, "Fine, you don't want me and my word? Okay. I'll give the blessings of the relationship I want with you to someone else who will appreciate it" – hearing this and knowing it's true fills those gathered in the synagogue with rage. How dare this former friend and neighbor insult us so! Just who does he think he is? Oh, yeah. He says he's the Christ – what blasphemy! They violently grab Jesus, drag him out of their town, and take him to the edge of a cliff with the intent to throw him from it. And somehow Jesus escapes from them. We're not told how; but it seems to be by a miracle of some kind. Like Moses parting the Red Sea, Jesus simply walks through the middle of the angry crowd and no one lays a hand on him. If so, and I think it's true, then they got to see their miracle after all – but funny, not one of them believed in him and followed him in faith. So Jesus left and took his message to those who would believe.

And what I'd have you see is this short story so early in Jesus' ministry foreshadows everything that is to follow. Jesus will spend the next three years revealing that he is indeed the Christ. In his preaching and teaching, by the miracles he performs, by the prophecies he fulfills he will demonstrate time and again to God's chosen people Israel that he is the Anointed One come to do his Father's will.

He will also repeatedly demonstrate *what* the Father has sent him to do; namely to restore that which was lost when mankind fell into sin. As he declared in the synagogue quoting

from Isaiah, he is here to preach good news to the poor – to the poor in spirit, that is. To those weighed down with the guilt of their sins, to those worn out trying to keep the righteous demands of God's Law, he has come to preach the good news that for his sake their sins are forgiven. To captives of the devil enslaved in sin and fearful of death and judgment, he has come to declare God's pardon and welcome. To the spiritually blind, to those who can't see or understand the truths of God, whose minds are darkened, he has come to give sight. To those who are oppressed, whose lives are a mess, whose relationships are broken, whose bodies are weak and failing, he has come to grant the perfect freedom of the life of the world to come. He has come declare the year of God's grace and favor. It's the age in which we live: the time from Christ's ascension to his return in glory when the Lord's favor is being preached to sinners who repent and believe the good news. Jesus will show time and again that these acts of restoration are what the Father has sent him to do.

And today's account reveals *how* Jesus will accomplish them; namely by being rejected by his own people, God's chosen nation Israel. It's worth noting that the word in today's text that's translated "hometown" is actually the Greek word "patridi". It means "the place of his father". In the text, it refers to Nazareth because that's where Joseph lived. But think about it: the place of Jesus' true Father is the Temple in Jerusalem. That's where he will ultimately be rejected. The priests and religious leaders will refuse to believe in him despite three years worth of proof positive that he is who he claims to be. They will condemn him. And they will see that he is put to death. In this they will be more successful than the angry mob at Nazareth; but in the end, Jesus will still walk away. When he rises from the grave he will pass through the midst of them, and take with him the blessings of his ministry – forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life – to others who would believe.

The account of Jesus' rejection at Nazareth is a preview of his entire ministry. You can even hear their demand that he prove himself by performing miracles echoed later at Calvary when they mock him saying, "If you are the Christ, prove yourself and come down from the cross." What they didn't understand, what they were too blind to see was that it was precisely because he *is* the Christ that he didn't come down. For it was on the cross through his passion and death that he was bearing the curse of sin and laying the foundation for the restoration of all things. The sad part is that even after he rose from the dead, for the most part, God's chosen people Israel still refused to believe. And thus the blessings of his Gospel went to and were received mostly by Gentiles who became God's people by faith in him.

That includes us. We are now God's chosen people by faith in Christ. Jesus makes his home in our midst. And while that's a good thing – the best thing ever – it also means we have to be on guard. Why? It's because if we learn nothing else from today's text we'd better at least get this: there is a tendency for those who are God's chosen people to reject Jesus. They did it at Nazareth. They did it at Jerusalem. What makes you think you can't do it too?

With that in mind, let's ask, why? Why did the people of his hometown and later the greater part of Israel reject Jesus? There are two big reasons. The first is that they did not recognize their needs. Consider again what Jesus said his mission was: to evangelize the poor, free captives, give sight to the blind, and liberate the oppressed. The Jews at the time of Christ rejected him in part because they refused to acknowledge that they *were* spiritually poor, that they *were* slaves to sin, and that they *were* blind to God's truth. They thought they had it all figured out and were pretty good people – that's why God chose them. And we run the same risk. The moment we think we can stand on our own, that spiritually we have enough in the bank, that we've got this sin thing pretty well under control, that we can see and understand God's truth without the enlightenment of his Holy Spirit who comes to us only through his Word

– when we fail to acknowledge our ongoing and continuous need every day for the gifts Christ gives through the ministry of his Church, we begin to reject him.

The other cause of rejecting Jesus, especially at Nazareth, is what we might call the scandal of the common and too familiar. The folks there couldn't get over the idea that the very plain and humble guy who lived and worked quite unremarkably in their little town for some thirty years could possibly be the Christ. No, no, the Christ would have to be from someplace super important. He'd have to have a special look about him. He'd have to really stand out and be impressive. He'd have to do miracles all over the place. Yeah, the Christ would have to appear like I want him to be.

But no, it doesn't work that way. Christ appears how *he* wants to be. He still does. And how does he appear to us? In ways that we sometimes think are too common and familiar. He comes to us in his Holy Word. And we think, "Oh, not this old Bible story again! I've heard it a hundred times. What more is there to get out of it?" Or perhaps we think, "What's this reading got to do with me?" Or "What's this story got to do with Christ? I don't see any Christ here." Jesus also appears in the words of absolution: when the pastor declares the forgiveness of sins in his name. And we think, "Oh, this again. Same old stuff. Man, this liturgy is boring. Wake me when it's over." Or again, Jesus appears under the forms of humble bread and wine offering forgiveness, life, and salvation – and I don't need to tell you that at least half of the Christian Church denies that Jesus is really there like he says he is. And sometimes we find it pretty hard to believe ourselves – at least, that's the way we treat his Holy Supper, like just something else to do rather than the great saving mystery that it is.

And here's one we don't often consider: Christ appears to us in the needs of our fellow believers. When a brother or sister in Christ is hurting or in want of any kind, Jesus says, "You're looking at me." And when we do something to alleviate that need, he says, "You did it to me." But the thing is, we don't find people's needs especially attractive. We'd prefer for them and their problems to go away. Leave me alone. And so doing, we reject Jesus here in his hometown.

You say, "I guess I haven't always seen it that way." That's right. It's because you're blind and spiritually poor and a captive to your sin. Own it. And then recognize that Jesus is here among us to fix all of that. For here he speaks, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim pardon to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" And then by his saving grace he concludes, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your ears." Believe him. Receive him. And follow him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!