

“The Uncomfortable Pew – Part 1” – Luke 4:14-21

Well, give me a Sunday off from preaching, like last week, and I feel like it's been ages since I had the opportunity. I feel like there's been a break or pause in the flow of the Christian year and as though it will take a bit to get back up to speed!

So, to help me – and maybe you as well – let's review where we were in the story of Jesus – the early years. Of course we had the birth narratives at Christmas, and then the early days with Jesus as a young lad in the temple. A couple of weeks ago we were able to observe Jesus at his baptism, and last week we read about the events at the wedding in Cana.

This week we have Jesus in Galilee, specifically in the synagogue in Nazareth, but we need to note that a few significant things have happened in the meantime. Mercifully we have moved past Luke's version of the genealogy of Jesus, although in some ways that's too bad because there is a huge clue in that genealogy as to Luke's particular emphasis that echoes both through his Gospel and the Book of Acts, also from his hand. Following that delineation, and immediately preceding today's events in Nazareth, Jesus experiences temptation in the wilderness – a time of hardship and testing during which his faith and his mission were honed to a fine edge. Apparently he has also spent some time in Caesarea, but we won't really hear about that until next week.

And so now we arrive at our reading for today. The details are straightforward enough: he attends at the synagogue on the Sabbath day – not for the first time, as we are told “it was his custom.” He is given a scroll to read, does so, and then offers a very, very short sermon, or commentary. Those of us who have read ahead will know that the reaction of the people was not very positive, but we'll leave a fuller look at that part until next week. Today, let's take a look at what Jesus was doing, what the people were doing, and what the significance of it all was.

To begin, the fact that Jesus was teaching in the synagogues was significant for several reasons. On the one hand it showed that he had achieved some status and recognition as a person of faith, but it also showed that he was a scholar of the biblical texts of his day. Far from the picture that we might have picked up in Sunday School, Jesus was no illiterate carpenter in the “back of beyond” in Galilee. Not only was he literate in the sense that he could read the scrolls, from his travels and daily encounters it is very likely that he was versed in several languages. You may recall that Greek was the common language of the marketplace in that area – and had been for more than two hundred years by Jesus' day. Latin was the language of the law courts and legal transactions, so it is possible that Jesus was familiar with that language as well. And then there was Hebrew, the language of the synagogue and the Jewish religion, and last of all Aramaic, a village language in Galilee. So, when Jesus is handed the scroll, and begins to read, we have an affirmation that he was both literate and learned – just try to find the place in the scroll where he started without Chapter, Verse, and Page Number references with which we are all familiar!

On the other hand, the fact that Jesus was reading from the scriptures in the synagogue was not a new or novel thing, even though what he read was. As we see from the Nehemiah passage reading from the law was a part of a public practice, a practice of reading, teaching, and responding to the law. Religious services that concentrated upon the reading and interpretation of the Scriptures came to be central in the synagogue – and the practice is continued today in our Christian services of the Word: reading from Scripture, a sermon that interprets and teaches, and a response from the people in the form of singing and prayer. It was, and still is, not enough to merely read the Scriptures even publicly, as the relevance of the Scriptures to both the time of their writing and the time of their reading needs to be examined and explained.

But while Jesus reading from Scriptures during the Sabbath worship services in the synagogue was not unusual in itself, what he chose to read was. With a worship practice that had started centuries earlier in the reading of the law in public assemblies, it seems likely that the practice had fallen into a recitation of familiar – and thus comfortable – texts. Sadly the texts that become so familiar were – and still are – often texts of judgment and power exercised by God. Texts which tell us how God is going to reap vengeance on someone else have always been popular, and were and are often used as a veiled reference to the wrath of God that will fall upon the listener if they are not careful!

And so when Jesus is handed the scroll I'm sure there was a nervous twitter that ran through the assembled congregation. What piece of blasting condemnation would he choose to read? Would he select from the familiar opening verses of the prophet Isaiah? *Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.*³ *The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.*⁴ *Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the LORD, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged!*⁵ *Why do you seek further beatings? Why do you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint.*⁶ *From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and bleeding wounds; they have not been drained, or bound up, or softened with oil.*⁷ *Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence aliens devour your land; it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.* (Isn't that wonderfully condemning, without feeling any personal responsibility?) Or would he choose from any of the other challenging yet comfortably familiar passages sprinkled throughout the scroll?

What Jesus did choose to read is familiar enough to us – made so by this very incident, among other reasons – but I'm not so sure it was as familiar to the listeners in the synagogue. However, familiar or not, what he read was not necessarily comfortable to them. People who are accustomed to hearing affirmations that God is going to wreak vengeance upon the earth (preferably on the other guy!) and that God's chosen one, the Messiah, would come to clean up the mess people had made of it on earth and would do so with a mighty arm and a sharp sword – to these people such a 'soft' message as this one would be somewhat uncomfortable. To be sure, immediately following the short passage quoted by Luke that ends with "*proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,*" comes the comfortably familiar to them "*and the day of vengeance of our God;*" but then the passage goes all soft and fuzzy again, with promises of "comfort all those who mourn" and "to give them a garland instead of ashes." Far from invoking the comfortable images of wrath and vengeance to be wreaked on the nasty 'other guys' who have caused all this calamity, here is a message of a good news that is not nearly so palatable. Where is the "eye for an eye?" Where is the "they'll get what they deserve?" In place of these comfortable themes are promises of redemption, even for those who don't deserve it. Offered instead are images of peace and prosperity – but for all, not just for the righteous, of whom each worshiper considered themselves a member.

It's no wonder "the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon him!" The people were anxiously awaiting to hear how he was going to dig himself out of this particular hole, or bind. How would Jesus interpret and explain this good news in such a way as to make it comfortable again?

But instead of making it more comfortable, Jesus did the exact opposite, throwing a challenge directly into their faces with his declaration, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And their reaction? We'll see that next week. To be continued ...