

“Religion Rage” – Luke 4:14-30 – Feb 1/04

Those of you who were here last week may recall me mentioning that I was preaching on the text from 1 Corinthians because the lectionary reading from Luke’s gospel was the first half of a whole story, and I promised to deal with it ‘next’ Sunday. Well, ‘next’ Sunday has come, and I still think that dealing with the incident as one complete unit is a better approach.

The incident in our text from Luke is the fascinating scene of the response of the people in Nazareth to Jesus’ pronouncement in their synagogue, a response that is amazing, but at the same time all too familiar. Luke, in his outline of this incident, provides us with some wonderful little details that give us a profound insight into what happened, and why.

To begin, Luke provides just a tiny bit of background, pointing out how Jesus, now filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, comes back out of the wilderness where he had undergone a period of testing and temptation. He returns from the desert to Galilee, and begins to teach in their synagogues. The people of Galilee were moved by what they heard, and word quickly spread about this strange man. Favourable reports about his teaching spread like wildfire throughout the region, and people in his home town of Nazareth began to hear these rumours and reports, and were mighty proud of ‘their’ boy. You can, I’m sure, easily imagine the pleased murmurs as the folks in Nazareth talked about their Jesus: “Yup, we should invite him to speak in our synagogue one of these Sabbaths!”

Sure enough, the big day came. The home town boy was in his home town, and the synagogue was packed. People shuffling and jostling for favourite seats, quickly glancing over the crowd to see who was there, and who might be missing this big event. The liturgical team was all primed, ready to include the guest of honour, this local boy who had ‘made good’ over in Capernaum. The synagogue leaders were lined up by rank, as one would expect. All was being done ‘decently and in order’, but there was still a huge sense of anticipation and excitement. Flashes of conversation would ripple across the excited crowd gathered there that Sabbath day, and then die out as people worried they might miss the big event, might not hear what he had to say.

Finally, the crowd is hushed, the worship begins. The crowd seems to breathe as one as the young man stands up, and their held breath lets out with a sigh of anticipation as one of the leaders gives him a scroll to read. “Look, it’s Isaiah’s writings!” goes the whisper of excitement, and the silence becomes total as Jesus finds the passage he wants to read, from what we now identify as Chapter 61. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me”, he reads. We nod in agreement, knowing that indeed the Spirit was clearly upon him, but the crowd in the synagogue doesn’t hear those words the same way, or with the same meaning as we do. Jesus continues reading, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because 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, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

I love the detail Luke adds to the story here. In two short sentences he paints a wall mural’s worth of picture. The little details he gives add colour, and sound and smell to this incident. Luke’s original readers, and we as well, recognize the truth of what Jesus has just read, that the Spirit of the Lord truly was upon him, and tremble with excitement at hearing that declaration so clearly from him. But that’s not what happened in that synagogue in Nazareth. After reading the passage, “Jesus rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down”. It’s exactly what we would expect him to do, but hearing the little details brings the moment alive. The tension is electric. “The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.” I’m sure you could have heard a pin drop. Not even the muted sounds of livestock in the town broke the spell.

And then he spoke: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” And the place went wild. All talking at once, speaking well of him. “I remember him, this is Joseph’s boy!” “I

helped him with his studies!” “I remember when he was just this tall!” The pride in their hometown boy made good and come home was palpable. This was their boy, he was one of them – no, he was theirs! What this would do for the town! Imagine the bragging rights! Can you imagine what this will mean for our synagogue? We’ll be able to put on that extension, build that hall, pay off the debts! This is fantastic! We’re so glad he’s ours, we can put him to such good use! Can you not just hear the babble of possessiveness swelling like a cheer in a SuperBowl stadium? (And you thought I couldn’t work today’s SuperBowl into this!) But can’t you recognize, can’t you hear the sudden swell of municipal pride at having a real prophet in their very own town? Why, that boy’s gonna make us famous!

Jesus could hear it. I’m pretty sure he could hear that surge of ownership swelling up to claim him, to harness the power in him for their own ends. Good ends, to be sure. Righteous ends, no doubt. But their own ends, not necessarily God’s. I’m pretty sure, because the next thing Jesus did was to burst their bubble, to tell them the truth of the matter, to provoke them into seeing the truth about the power within him.

And provoke them he did! Talk about religion rage! Jesus not only directly exposed and challenged their motives, pointing out how they were already beginning to demand of him that he do in his hometown what they heard he had done in Capernaum. I would dearly love to know what was behind his claim that they would demand of him, “Doctor, cure yourself!”, but I’ll have to wait until I meet him face to face to know what that was all about. But there’s no doubt that Jesus not only spotted the desire of the people of Nazareth to own him, and he shut that down immediately. He even went so far as to point out two times in Israel’s history when God’s favour had been withheld from the Israelites, but granted to foreigners.

This was more than the good people of Nazareth, the religious and the righteous gathered there in that synagogue on that Sabbath day, could take. It was bad enough he had started his work in a competing town, but just listen to him! Even though we welcomed him home, even though we put on this gathering to hear him, even though we’re willing to sell Tee-shirts with his name all over them, here he is telling us that God’s favour is for strangers, foreigners even! Next he’ll be telling us that his power is not for us, but for strangers and foreigners also!

And for a second time, the crowd went wild. But this time, instead of a huge surge of pride, this time the mood was ugly. The religious, the righteous of Nazareth turned like a pack of wolves on the Lamb in their midst. Their rage was intense, and complete, and their intent was murder as they dragged Jesus to the brow of a hill to kill him. What irony that their rage and fury that he would think they were not worthy of his gifts of reconciliation and healing made them blind to the truth that their rage and fury prevented them from truly understanding and recognizing his gifts of healing and reconciliation.

However angry they were, no matter the depth of their religious rage, the people of Nazareth were impotent, powerless to carry out their murderous plan, and Jesus eluded them, passing right through the midst of them. That escape leaves us with a bizarre image of Jesus walking through the crowd, people so immersed in fuelling and reinforcing each others anger and rage that they were blind to his presence as he walked in the midst of them, and then away from them, leaving them to sulk and nurse their wounded pride. One can just imagine the recriminations and sour mood in the synagogue the following Sabbath. One can only hope there was also a pall of shame that hung over the town in the aftermath of this revealing incident, but unfortunately those who are prone to religion rage are seldom prone to corresponding remorse and repentance.

It’s all too easy to look back at this incident and go ‘tsk, tsk’ at the people of Nazareth. It’s all too easy to say, with what we know about how the story unrolled like a scroll of Isaiah, how the power

of the Spirit at work in Jesus was confirmed time and again as he carried on his ministry, how his oneness with God was affirmed in his death and resurrection, it's too easy to say, "poor people of Nazareth, we can excuse them because they couldn't have known".

But how then do we excuse the same kind of religious rage that we see today? Given that anyone who professes a faith in Jesus, the risen Christ, knows how he healed Israelite and foreigner alike, how he justified eating and drinking with sinners, how the message of proclaiming the good news he brought was to be proclaimed to all, Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave or free, given all that understanding and witness and affirmation of the power of God's Holy Spirit at work in Jesus, how can anyone justify today's religious rage that surfaces whenever Jesus' proclamation is heard?

And that rage exists. It exists among today's equivalent of the people of Nazareth, among those who claim ownership of Jesus, who still insist he's OUR hometown boy. There are still today many who would be comfortable in the midst of that raging crowd in the synagogue in Nazareth, out of control with anger at any suggestion that God's love, mercy, compassion, healing, and worst of all, acceptance might be for someone outside the group. Their rage is worse yet at any hint that God's love, mercy, compassion, healing and acceptance might be instead for someone outside the rabid and raging religious rabble. Any suggestion of that truth today is met with the same kind of reaction as in the synagogue in Nazareth, as is all too clear from the flurry in the Christian press.

But to those who can stand aside from the raging righteous the truth is clear from the how the story ended. God did not permit the hostile, murderous crowd from carrying out their mission. Jesus continued his ministry, unfettered by the limitations of those who would insist his power was only for them and those like themselves. He continued to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. He continued his mission and ministry to all, not just to the children of Israel but to foreigners, women, lepers, the outcasts as well as the mighty. And he demonstrated in his death and resurrection the truth of his claim that "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me", sealing for us his promise that the gift of the Spirit would be ours as well.

Thanks be to God that his power, and the power of His Son, Jesus Christ, and the power of His Holy Spirit, is not limited by those who would try to claim ownership over Him, and that his power, mercy and grace is available to widows and foreigners and outcasts like you and me.