

I'd like to begin today by setting the scene for our Gospel reading. It is from Luke chapter 4, so this is towards the beginning of the story of Jesus. Not long before our reading Jesus was anointed with water and the Holy Spirit when he was baptized. Then he went out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. With our reading today he has come back to Galilee and Nazareth, which is his hometown.

Thus our reading today is a report of what was happening early on. People were just beginning to hear and know about Jesus. This was because of what Jesus himself was saying and doing. However, Jesus is not always believed in and accepted. At the end of our reading, the people of Nazareth wanted to throw him off a cliff.

In the sermon today I'd like to look more closely at Jesus's sermon, which was based on a section of Isaiah. We will see how Jesus's sermon was applicable to the people at Jesus's time as well as being applicable to ourselves. Then I'd like to consider how and why Jesus was rejected. This, also, I think you will see, is applicable to us.

So, let's take up the main point of Jesus's sermon. Here is a portion of what he read from Isaiah: "**The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.**" When Jesus was finished reading he said, "**Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.**" Jesus was saying that this prophecy was about him.

Let's look more closely at this prophecy. It says, "**The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.**" We know that the Holy Spirit came down upon Jesus in the form of a dove at his baptism. It says, "**Because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.**" This is a good, general statement about what Jesus does. The word "**anointed**" is the meaning of the word "Christ." Jesus is the anointed one. The reason why he has been anointed is "**to proclaim good news to the poor.**" "**Good news**" is the meaning of the word "Gospel." Thus we have a couple short statements that well describe Jesus: He is the anointed one, the Christ. He proclaims the Gospel, good news, to the poor.

Good news is always welcome to the poor. Poverty is a major hindrance to the enjoyment of life. It prevents people from doing what they would otherwise like to do. People might not be able to buy what they want because they are poor. People might be able to go to the doctor because they are poor. If it gets really bad, people might not be able to buy food. Poverty is the lack of power to do what you want.

Throughout the Gospels you can read about how Jesus helped people who didn't have the resources to help themselves. People came to him who were in the grips of evil spirits. The evil spirits made them miserable, but they lacked the power to get them out. People came to Jesus who were sick with various diseases. If any of you have had diseases that don't go away, you know how tiring and frustrating that can be. Helplessness in the face of a disease that is stronger than you can be very frightening. It might mean the death of you. Jesus helped people like that.

Let me pause for a moment to point out that Jesus continues to have good news for the poor. This has not stopped, nor has it been lessened from the reports of Jesus's miracles that we hear about in the Gospels. A lot of people assume that since miracles like that aren't very common, Jesus must no longer be at work, or that his work is strictly spiritual and therefore somewhat unreal. The truth is that Jesus's

work after the resurrection is stronger and more profound than anything he did before. The works Jesus does and will do are greater.

Let me give you a few examples. Jesus forgives sins. Maybe you have grown cold to that idea, but maybe I can refresh it for you by a simple question: What are you able to do to make up for the evil you have done? There's nothing. You are powerless. You are poor. The good news that is proclaimed to the poor is that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin.

Or how about those diseases? How about that progressive onset of death that we call getting old? How about death itself? What can you do in the face of these things? Our options are severely limited, even with all our medical advances. The good news is that by his death Jesus defeated the power of death, and by his resurrection he opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.

Let me give you one more healing that I am especially looking forward to. What can be done with our evil minds and souls? What can be done with our anger? What can be done with our dirty minds, our coveting, meanness, sadness, apathy, coldness towards life, and a host of other evils? We are bombarded with commercials for various drugs, some of which might help somewhat, but they can't ever get to the core. The resurrection means healing not only for our bodies, but also our minds and souls. Believing in Jesus is trusting him to do things that otherwise seem impossible.

So, to get back to our text: After he finished reading from Isaiah Jesus said, "I'm the fulfillment of what you heard. I preach good news to the poor. I set people free from unbreakable chains." And, as it turns out, the people were quite receptive. "How interesting!" they said. "He speaks so well! Maybe I'll sign up for his newsletter. It's especially surprising since one of our own. He's Joseph's son, is he not?"

This is the point at which everything changed in the story. The change is so abrupt that it's easy to miss. Everything was going fine, the people were enjoying Jesus, but then Jesus said some more stuff and they were no longer pleased. They started to push and shove him towards the brow of a cliff. What happened?

It's Jesus's fault really. Jesus turned on them. After they started talking about him as the mere son of Joseph, Jesus knew that they would eventually be dissatisfied with him, and he told them so. Others—foreigners—would believe in him, but they would be left out in the cold. He brought up a couple Old Testament examples with the prophets Elijah and Elisha through whom God did miracles to foreigners, but not to his own people. This was what upset his hearers in his hometown. If he would have just left them be with their lukewarm admiration, they wouldn't have had such a violent reaction—at least not at that point. Jesus got pushy, and they didn't like that.

This is not uncommon. There are several examples in the Bible where people responded to the Gospel by saying, "How interesting. I would not be opposed to hearing more about that in the future." However, the message that Jesus preaches is not just a pleasant way to pass the time or to be part of a community. Jesus's message is "**Repent, and believe the Gospel.**" Another way of saying the same thing is: "Change your ways, change your mind, believe the good news that Jesus preaches to the powerless

poor.” That is an all or nothing proposition. Either you will change your mind or you won’t. Either Jesus will have all of you, or you will reject him.

Jesus speaks this way in other places as well. It always make us nervous, because we are afraid to commit completely and totally. So, for example, Jesus says: “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” That is being “all in” on Jesus. It is difficult and scary, but it makes sense if you think about it.

Jesus is the difference between total bliss and freedom on the one hand or total sadness and imprisonment on the other. Either Jesus sets you from all your enemies—even those that you thought were impossible to overcome. Or you are still stuck—powerless and impoverished—in the face of things much mightier than you. It makes sense that this must be an all or nothing kind of thing.

Jesus is not like an insurance policy that you stick in the filing cabinet until you have to use it. Jesus is Christ the king who is at work with the Gospel and sacraments. He is converting one soul at a time by the power of the Holy Spirit. The purpose of his kingdom is to destroy all the evil works of the devil. You don’t fight wars with insurance policies. Wars involve total commitment.

The people at Nazareth refused to be completely serious about Jesus. They thought he was interesting. They thought he was a good speaker. They would have told you that they were on his side! But they quit being on his side when he told them that their lukewarm approval wouldn’t cut it. Eventually their lukewarm approval would turn to criticism, because then it is only a matter of time before Jesus says or does something that doesn’t meet their complete approval.

It is easy to apply this to ourselves. We are not unlike those Nazarenes! None of us, including myself, are comfortable “losing our lives” as Jesus puts it. None of us are as eager as we should be to take up our cross and follow him. It is much easier to believe that merely being a fan of Jesus is good enough. And, if you think about it, how convenient! We can feel good about being a fan without having to live as a soldier of the cross, denying ourselves.

But this fakery only makes sense if there is no real war going on. There is a war. Jesus is our king. He is fighting against the devil and all evil, including the evil that is found in us, his Christians. The nature of the situation requires us always to repent and believe the Gospel. Repent and go “all in” with Jesus. You will not be disappointed!

