

4 Epiphany, YrC '10

31 Jan 10

Jerem 1:4-10; Ps 71:1-6, 15-17; 1 Cor 14:12-20;

Luke 1:21-32

The Rev. Michael Williams @ St. George's Anglican

Introduction:

Do you relish the profound and immeasurable blessing of sharing in the resurrection life of a community of citizens who, with disciplined humility and heavenly grace, put their faith in their Savior and Lord Jesus Christ; who, by the power of God the Holy Spirit, are richly devoted to the Apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers?

Anglican Priests in CANA who serve as chaplains – numbering some 67 souls now serving or in the process of coming on board to serve – are often called to serve in places where no established Anglican fellowship is to be found. The result of this physical calling apart is a nagging sense of disconnectedness, of loneliness and isolation; not unlike that experienced by those who are deployed, by the sick, the imprisoned, the Christian in exile, and by so many others who are in Christ, yet destitute and alone.

In his book, Life Together, The Rev, Dr. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed. Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God’s grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare:

It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.” (Life Together, p.20)

Transition:

In the opening of his sermon from the 4th chapter of St. Luke last week, Fr. Armstrong quoted several of our Church Fathers who unanimously made the point that when Jesus stood in his home-town place of worship, the synagogue in Nazareth, and read the prophetic text from Isaiah 61, the “messianic era of salvation began in that very moment.” This theme now continued in the opening verses of this morning’s

gospel reading, Jesus' simple announcement shocked the synagogue community and shook the foundations of all prophetic revelation when he sat down and proclaimed, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The promised Messiah was right there in the midst of the Jewish community, and with his arrival came The good news for the poor, the release of captives, sight for the blind and liberty for the oppressed.

But had Jesus made his inaugural appearance in the midst of a community of believers who put their faith in his Heavenly Father, and who would thus recognize and receive him immediately with adoration and praise, or had he stepped into the midst of a battle field, i.e., a place of darkness, hostility and violence, a place of barren desolation and stark loneliness?

I. Exegesis:

As the members of the synagogue were catching their breath, one can imagine Jesus sitting in dignified silence... All of the stunned gazes and dropped jaws devolving into a frenzied buzz of side bar deliberation and analysis.

At first the spirit and content of the conversations were apparently of a positive nature, affirming Jesus' words as gracious and his identity reputable as the son of Joseph. But in his perfect wisdom, Jesus could see where things were headed, i.e., that he would soon be treated with the same respect with which all the prophets through the ages had been treated in their home country; that is, with no respect at all. And so Jesus anticipated and pre-empted their doubts and inevitable demand for signs, demands for him to perform miracles for them – as they heard he had done in Capernaum – as a means of proving his identity.

But Jesus knew that they were faithless such that his performance of signs and miracles would serve to no avail. And so he confronted their lack of faith by reminding them of two instances in their history as a people where, because of the faithlessness and idolatry of the Jewish community, God's prophets, Elijah and then Elisha, were sent only to provide miraculously for the sake of the widow at Zarapheth of Sidon, and Naaman the Syrian, both gentile citizens.

This not so subtle slam by Jesus, this indictment of the stark hollowness of their faith, pushed them over the edge. When the members of the Nazareth synagogue community heard Jesus' analogy and took to heart his comparing them to the apostate people of Israel in the darkest days of their most base faithlessness and idolatry, they were enraged and their nostrils flared. In the darkness of their souls, they could not remain in the presence of the light; and they turned on Jesus with an inflamed and murderous hostility.

They forced him out of their town to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, intending to push him over the edge. "But passing through the midst of them, Jesus went on his way."

The promised Messiah, the long-awaited savior announced his arrival in the midst of his chosen people, and they quickly and vehemently rejected him, and ran him out of town.

II. Focus

It is probably not news to most of you that this tension and this dynamic have been realities of the revelation of Jesus Christ from the inauguration of his earthly ministry until today. The proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is, for those who receive him, "good news for the poor, the release of captives, sight for the blind and liberty for the oppressed." Those who receive him abide in his peace which passes all understanding, and in the fellowship of His body, the Church.

But for those who reject Jesus as Savior and Lord, the gospel message generates the same hostile tension today as it did the day Jesus read from the book of the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth; except that today the tension is within churches rather than synagogues... and the vehement hostility is manifest through courts and covenants, in both cases mounting prosecutions designed to side-step the real issue (that we are all sinners in need of saving, and that Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord), courts and covenants designed to legislate contrived gospels in place of the True one, contrived gospels that suite the unholy devices and desires of the corrupt hearts and minds from which they emanate.

Retired Archbishop of Singapore, Moses Tay believes this is precisely what is being propagated via the final version of the Windsor Covenant, a document commended to the Anglican Communion provinces for final consideration by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Archbishop Tay says that the Covenant is “Whitewash.” That it “cannot be of God because if you try to keep the light and darkness together, righteous and immoral together, (in order) to say we are a church, it’s disparaging the meaning of covenant.” The Archbishop suggests that the overriding aim of the Covenant is not faithfulness, but institutional unity...(meaning the Anglican Communion).

...Rather like the members of the Nazareth synagogue proposing to Jesus (the One through whom all things were made) that he has his revelation and they have their revelation, so since it would be arrogant and judgmental to suggest that one person has the corner on the final revelation, let’s all agree to maintain our unity by respecting each other’s right to have our own revelation.

III. Application:

But when we hear Jesus proclaim, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” far from taking offense, through our Lord Jesus - through the power of his work of redemption - the poverty of our spirits is filled to overflowing with the Good News and with the Holy Spirit; from the captivity of our bondage to sin we are released; from the blindness of our ignorance and our stubborn arrogance we are delivered; and from the destructive weight of our guilt’s oppression we are joyfully set free.

This is why we say together with one voice, “Praise be to thee O Christ!”

Even as we, like our Lord Jesus, live our lives in a world that is hostile toward him, toward the message of repentance and redemption through Christ alone, and toward those who love and serve him, we heed the exhortation of a fellow Christian who was martyred for his faith, i.e., to fall on our knees and give thanks for the great blessing of our Christian community, and for the grace to worship and to work together

for the increase of Christ's Kingdom; not taking such blessed fellowship for granted, but acknowledging that with great giftedness and resources comes great responsibility to keep our hands to the plow....and to do so with a fervent passion while we have such a great freedom to do so.

Closing:

Bonhoeffer writes, "The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us. We have one another only through Christ, but through Christ we do have one another, wholly, and for all eternity." (Life Together, p.26)

Relish this rare, profound and immeasurable blessing of sharing in the resurrection life of a community of citizens who, with disciplined humility and heavenly grace, put their faith in their Savior and Lord Jesus Christ; who, by the power of God the Holy Spirit, are richly devoted to the Apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.