

Sermon – 07/11/2010 pm

Nazareth Manifesto

Study Text: Luke 4:14-21

Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing (4:21). Can you imagine coming to worship and hearing the preacher say such a thing. ‘This day is like any other’ you would say. ‘What does this fellow think is so special about today?’ ‘And what makes him think he is so special’ you might ask.

The people in Nazareth probably asked such questions when Jesus preached in their town. They understood the significance of the claim he was making. They understood that the passage Jesus read and said was fulfilled ‘today’ was actually about the Messiah, the anointed of God and the promised deliverer.

Power of the Spirit

Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee (4:14). Where did he return from? He returned from the desert where he had been led by the Spirit to be tested. He resisted the devil and returned victorious. He came back in the power of the Holy Spirit to do the work his Father had sent him to do. Luke continues to describe how the Holy Spirit lead Jesus and empowered him in all he did.

Did Jesus go straight from the desert to Nazareth? Luke tells us he returned to Galilee and to Nazareth, a town in the hills of Galilee; but in verse 23 Jesus spoke of what he had done in Capernaum – or what they *had heard* he had done. Capernaum was a town by the sea in Galilee. Jesus stayed there during most of his ministry in Galilee (4:31). John's gospel indicates that Jesus also ministered in Judea before going to Galilee (John 4:43).

Luke had his reasons for writing in detail of Jesus’ preaching in Nazareth and putting this account so early in his ‘orderly account’ – not necessarily chronological account. In Matthew chapter 13 we read a similar account of possibly the same visit of Jesus to his home town of Nazareth.

From the beginning Jesus declared himself to be the Messiah, the deliverer who was spoken of by the prophets long ago. ‘This prophecy is fulfilled today’ said Jesus. ‘This prophecy is fulfilled in me’ he said in effect. This boy from Nazareth declared himself the deliverer or saviour of the Jews. His name meant ‘the Lord saves’ but that did not mean much to the Jews.

Jesus was ready to be rejected in his home town and even by his own family. They were impressed by his eloquence, and even his gracious words, but nothing entered their hearts. What came out of their hearts was animosity and hostility. Jesus knew the good news he preached was for Gentiles as well as Jews. Many Gentiles would hear and believe in Jesus even as his own people rejected him.

Preach in Nazareth

Jesus taught in their synagogues and everyone glorified him (4:15). When he came to Nazareth, where his family lived, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day *as was his custom* (4:16). Jewish worship was focused on the temple in Jerusalem. Sacrifices could only be made in the temple. There were probably no synagogues before the destruction of the temple and the exile to Babylon in 586BC.

As far as we know ten Jewish men could establish a synagogue as a place for worship. They would gather to pray and praise God, and read and teach the Scriptures. In this passage we have the earliest account of some aspects of this worship.

It was the custom or habit of Jesus to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath day. He would have gone as a child and continued to go as an adult. He went there to hear the Scriptures read and then taught. As an adult male Jew he was allowed to speak himself. When he visited a place he was probably invited to read a passage and speak to the congregation, as was the practice in the days of the apostle Paul (Acts 12:15).

In one sermon I was reading the preacher commented on Jesus' custom of going to the synagogue every Sabbath. He said we must make it our habit to go to church every week. He said that Jesus may not have felt like going some days but he made it his habit. It is doubtful that Jesus did not feel like going or ever made excuses not to go to the synagogue, but it is certain every other human being has done so.

It is sad to hear the excuses that some make. It is tragic to see some slowly attending less and less until they are rarely seen in the church. A day missed here and there can soon become a day attended here and there. Their life gets busy and they get worried and stressed but are not wise enough to associate this stress with their backsliding. They still want to be church members and even think they are good Christians.

Jesus left us an example to follow. If you are a true follower of Jesus you will follow his example. You will stop making excuses, thinking that God will understand. God understands perfectly. He understands that he does not come first in your life if you choose to absent yourself from worship on the Lord's Day.

Jesus went into the synagogue to worship and *stood up to read* (4:16). We cannot be sure of the practice but like Paul he may have been invited to read that day; or maybe it was his turn; or maybe he was the first to stand up. Jesus stood up to read, so the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. It was a scroll not a book with pages. An attendant took the scroll from the shelf and gave it to Jesus.

Isaiah was probably the scroll set for reading that day. Jesus opened the scroll, and found chapter 61 (as we know it), and began to read. The reading would have been in Hebrew; someone would have translated into Aramaic. After reading Jesus gave the scroll *back to the attendant and sat down* (4:20). He sat down to teach what this passage of Holy Scripture meant.

Prophecy Fulfilled

Luke writes that *the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on him* (4:20). Maybe he mentions this because it was as unusual in that time as it is now for the preacher have the undivided attention of the congregation. Can you picture everyone sitting there eagerly listening to every word that Jesus said? There were no people coming in or going out, and no one looking out the window or at the clock. The eyes of all were fixed on the preacher and what he was saying.

It is important to listen attentively when God's word is being read. I recall a fellow standing up and walking out of this church when God's word was being read. A preacher friend of mine would ask for the doors to be locked when he read the Bible and preached the word. He knew how the devil tries to distract people whenever the gospel is being preached. Coming to church in body is one thing. Coming to church in mind is another.

Despite fixing their eyes on Jesus the hearts of these people remained as hard as rock. They did not like what they heard, so they turned on Jesus. Who did this fellow think he was telling them what the reading meant? They had heard it many times before. They knew what the passage meant. Some people in church listen attentively so they can find fault with the preacher. They are sure they know more than the preacher. They know what some previous preacher said and regard his words as infallible.

The prophet Isaiah wrote during the 8th century BC. He wrote about the coming judgment of God upon the city. Jerusalem would be destroyed and the people taken captive to Babylon. But he also had good news. He prophesied of their return and the restoration of the city of God (Isaiah 61:4).

The words of Isaiah have different levels of fulfilment. Isaiah spoke about the return from exile. But his words also pointed to the coming of the Messiah or anointed one. This is how they were understood by the Jews in Nazareth and elsewhere. They were again in bondage. They were being oppressed by the Romans. They were looking for Messiah to come and deliver them from this oppression. Jesus, however, did not measure up to their expectations of Messiah.

Jesus read from Isaiah about preaching the gospel to the poor, healing the broken hearted, giving liberty to captives and sight to the blind. He proclaimed the years of the Lord's favour, which would have been understood as the Jubilee year. Every fifty years in Israel there was wholesale release of slaves, cancellation of debts and return to ancestral property.

What did Jesus mean by saying *today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing* (4:21). Clearly it had not finally been fulfilled prior to this. The prophecy was good news. It was about release from bondage. Release from bondage of any kind is good news. In his ministry Jesus released many from blindness and poverty. He released many from bondage to evil spirits.

Jesus was concerned about the physical welfare of people, but above all about their spiritual welfare. He proclaimed release for human hearts not just human bodies. He proclaimed release from bondage to sin and death. This release was for Jew and Gentile. It was for all who were poor in spirit and burdened by their sin.

Some Christians maintain this Nazareth manifesto is all about political liberation of the poor and oppressed in the name of Jesus. Different groups have hijacked this passage for their own purpose. They fail to understand that Jesus did not empty the prisons in Palestine nor did he take on the Romans politically. Such people make the same mistake as the Jews.

Jesus was compassionate towards the poor and the oppressed. He was concerned for all who were lost and like sheep without a shepherd. He came to preach good news to all, all who would acknowledge their bondage to sin and the devil. To those who believe in him Jesus says 'remain in me and my word and you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free'. *If the Son makes you free you shall be free indeed* (John 8:32, 36).

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