



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Sunday, October 18, 2020

The Feast of St. Luke the Evangelist

Scripture Passages: 2 Timothy 4:5-13 & Luke 4:14-21

+ In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

St. Luke is the one of the four Gospel writers who began his Gospel so winsomely - with the words; “Dear Theophilus” – Theophilus, which means lover of God. Scholars say that’s a kind of code for us all – everyone who loves God or wants to love God. So I guess St. Luke wrote his account to us all and says that he does so that we can know that the faith we have been taught is certainty.

I am rather fond of Luke’s Gospel – perhaps it’s because he seems to have had a special care for people – characters – and especially women. Perhaps it’s the physician in him that accounts for this deep interest in people. His is a Gospel that also pays attention to Jesus in prayer - and to the particular role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ ministry.

And in our Gospel passage this morning we find the very first scene Luke paints to describe Jesus’ public ministry. Now, just a note - we should always pay particular attention to first scenes, because first scenes in the Gospels are really important – they introduce the conversation we’re about to join and they paint in the scene and show us what’s going to be important in the rest of the story to come. So, it’s always worth paying attention to what comes first in the Gospels.

So, what’s first here? The words, “then Jesus, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, returned to Galilee.” Jesus – back from 40 days in the wilderness, fresh from having dealt with the deepest temptation from Satan, is filled with the power of the Spirit.

Clearly it’s important to Luke for us to know that, and perhaps even more, it’s important to Luke that we know just what this kind of power looks like.

And just at this juncture, when we’re waiting to catch Jesus’s first words like pearls – what does he do? Well, he quotes a prophet. The prophet Isaiah. Now

Isaiah has a special place in Jesus' heart. We know this because he quotes that challenging prophet a LOT. Isaiah wasn't always very well received because his vision for the people of Israel was in stark contrast to the definitions of power in this world.

Isaiah, like all the prophets was ignored in real time by the people of Israel. He just couldn't get a decent hearing – probably because he was always telling folks what they did not want to hear. But his words were so powerful and so true that they reverberated down the ages and found fresh power and meaning in Jesus' ministry. And these are the words that Jesus chooses to read in Nazareth to an astonished and soon to be hostile crowd, who remembers – conveniently – that this Jesus is merely Joseph the carpenter's son (and who does he think he is?) and therefore nobody really special so they convince themselves that they don't really have to listen to him after all.

What is really interesting about what Jesus chooses to be his first words are who he names. Notice that all the people named by Jesus in this passage from Isaiah have one thing in common. It's that they are definitely not the powerful people in the world.

Jesus claims that he has been set apart – anointed even - to bring good news – but not to the rich nor the influential nor the socially connected and powerful in order to upset the world order through dominance or violence but to:

the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed.

These aren't the powerful. They are the outcasts, the outsiders, the outliers.

Not the insiders, the in-crowd. And yet Jesus, the son of God, the Messiah, the one who was before all worlds, says he comes for them. Huh.

Well this, I think, if we take this seriously – and we should - should give us pause and makes us re-think our ideas of what power looks like. I mean, we are in a season of debating the content of power; what is the right use of power? What is it supposed to accomplish for the common good. Does it look like care and compassion for those who find themselves on the margins? Or does it look like indifference?

And as Christians what we aspire to in the right use of power is that it patterns itself on the way that God, the holder of ultimate power wields it.

That's because there is a particular quality to the power of God. And this is really important. It concerns us all. And that is, that it kicks in – is powerful - when it's used for others. In Love.

You see, it's not about displaying our own accomplishments or what we can marshal in the way of money and influence as a bulwark against other people's power, God's power is powerful only through what it accomplishes for others.

The power of God sets others free; it is power only when it builds up others, when it's used for the welfare of those around us. That kind of power ushers in the kingdom.

Well that's pretty different from the demonstrations of power that we live with, isn't it? It's actually just about the polar opposite in fact. Might ends up having a pretty good shot at right at the moment everywhere we look: politically, economically and socially.

But for Christians who are called to pursue what Jesus outlines here – all the things that add up to justice - that's just not good enough, not nearly good enough - not by a long shot.

Even that's the power of the good news right there – that we can recognize that and resist the urge to just fall in with how the world is just because its pull is so strong.

Now the Gospel isn't easy. That's because it's meant to effect a change in us. And what do we all hate? Change. But we are not supposed to be the same after we read the Gospel. We are supposed to walk away today – if I've done my job properly – with an altered worldview. Even if it just moves us a few inches along the road of faithfulness. Just like the people to whom Jesus preached his first sermon.

People like us. People who struggle with many things: with COVID- induced confusion, isolation or depression. We struggle with financial worries and relationship worries. We struggle to know God's vision for our lives; we struggle to know truth and love and peace. So many things we contend with in our lives. Just like the folks Jesus first preached to with power.

And they just like we, needed their lives to be turned upside down so that what was old becomes new.

They just like we, need to know that God sees them, God regards them, God looks with favour upon them, because when we take that in, it is life-changing.

Could it be that the power of God at work in Jesus pushes us to change our ideas of power and re-orient our attention away from ourselves to those around us?

I think that may be exactly what Jesus' first sermon was about.

Because Jesus' first sermon is perfectly in tune with every other sermon he ever preached... Blessed are the poor in spirit... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... Store up for yourself treasures in heaven...The first shall be last and the last shall be first.

And I'm pretty sure that as Lovers of God, just so many "Dear Theophiluses," that that's what we're supposed to do too as a core principle of how we follow the one who made the blind to see, the lame to walk, who cured lepers, made the deaf to hear, and the dead raised to life.

Every week wherever we are planted, we are to live the Good News as best we can, offer ourselves in the power of the Holy Spirit – that power that is made real and transformative as it is spent on others - through whatever means we can in words of love and acts of mercy. And may God help us as we do.

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