

Fulfilling Scripture

“Help us see Christ” we just sang. So, in your mind’s eye, have a good look at Jesus now, in this story, being invited to give a message at His synagogue in the village of Nazareth. It’s more than likely the synagogue He attended as a boy with His parents. Jesus would have been about 30 years old at this moment. The introduction ahead of this story tells us that Jesus had been teaching at various synagogues in the region around Nazareth, so in all likelihood His boyhood synagogue had invited Him to give the Sabbath message.....to hear what He had to say.

I imagine in my mind’s eye, I imagine Him standing there at the lectern/pulpit.....and looking over the worshippers gathered in there in front. He would recognize His mother in back, his brothers and sisters as well, his boyhood playmates, people he and His father Joseph did carpentry work for, He knew them by name. He had lived among them for 30 years. But, more than just names and faces Jesus could recognize, He knew their life stories, their life histories. He had shared the high points of celebrations, the sad news of deaths of loved one, the struggles with disease and horrendous debt, forcing some to sell themselves as slaves, those who struggled with mental illness.

Matthew 9:36 tells us Jesus frequently saw the crowds harassed, sheep without a shepherd, and the word “harassed” means “bewildered by those who were supposed to give spiritual direction”. I suspect He could see on the faces of those in the synagogues the tired, strained look, anxious for their children’s spiritual future under the influence of the Greek culture. Will they keep faith?

He absorbed all this and He was handed the Torah scroll, the Scriptures. It was the scroll of Isaiah, the prophet of hope for ancient Israel. Bible scholars are uncertain if the reading Jesus chose was supposed to be the required reading, or if He deliberately chose

this particular reading as His text...Isaiah 61:1,2. And He read: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, the Lord has anointed me, to preach good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, to give sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" – the year of Jubilee.

Who were these poor, the prisoners, the blind, the oppressed that Isaiah mentions? They were right there in front of Jesus – these were the ones who yearned for Hope, renewal, yearning to believe that there was coming a year of the Lord's favour about to dawn on them.

We should note in the story, the clear mention that Jesus was in the power of the Spirit on this preaching journey through Galilee and now Nazareth. He had, as the text implies in verse 14, just come out of tremendous test of wills with the Devil in the wilderness. We know this episode with the Devil was what we know as the Three Temptations: making stones to bread; jumping down from the Temple tower; inheriting the splendour and authority of the nations of the world. Satan prompting Jesus to choose. And each time Jesus refused to bite. When we think about these temptations, they are just three tests of one essential temptation...The Devil said to Jesus "If you are the Son of God...go for this..." The word "if" is to be understood in the sense of "since" as in "Well, since you are the Son of God, you have the power, freedom to choose what you would like..." And Jesus' response was to all three offers "Not my will, but God's will be done" Repeat: "Not my will but God's will be done. I've not come to do my will but His."

So, then with that same power of the Spirit on Him, the text says, Jesus sat down and then said "I have been anointed not to do my will but my Father's – I declare the year of the Lord's favour. This Scripture from Isaiah is fulfilled in your hearing." So now two considerations: what is this "year of the Lord's favour"? What does it mean to fulfill Scripture?

The year of the Lord's favour was another way of saying "the year of Jubilee" – that event that came every 50 years according to the Mosaic law in Leviticus 25. It was a period when, as it were, heaven came down to earth. In that Jubilee period of time, slaves were to be set free, debts were to be cancelled, mortgages torn up, ancestral family land was to be returned to the original family, proclaim liberty through the land, families were to be reunited. People were to rest and enjoy the fruit of the land. So, you can well imagine, the common folk, poor, in debt, dispossessed of land, longed to see that day. Every 50 years, every generation would at least experience it at least once. It would be as if Heaven had come to earth.

This was Messiah talk!!!! This is Jesus talking like the Messiah, whom the people listening to Him, believed would redeem Israel, give liberation and return Israel to her former glory. And then Jesus said; "today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." He is the Messiah, they would later discover, not just Joseph's son.

So, when Jesus said "Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" What did He just say? Fulfilled? What is it to fulfill Scripture? It is this...as the Spirit was on Him, Jesus said essentially this: "I am committed to this vision of the coming Kingdom of God". "I'm saying "Yes" to this call of Isaiah to declare the year of the Lord's favour". If you can see it, this is Jesus' profession of faith. "I'm saying "Yes" to the will of God. Not my will, but God's". "My time in the desert prepared me for this moment."

This kind of commitment fulfills Scripture in this way - Scripture has really one basic message: It's God's word to you and me to tell us that we are called to be a child of God and act like one, and when you respond to that call you fulfill Scripture. You fulfill Scripture, when what you aim to be and to do, meets what God wants done. Pure and simple. When what you aim to do with your life meets what God wants done – you follow the will of God.....you fulfill Scripture. His will is done on earth as it is in Heaven.

And so, Jesus threw Himself totally for three years into that calling: healing the sick, raising the dead, giving hope to the disheartened, feeding the hungry: He had compassion on the people He met. Giving the people who believed in Him a vision of the coming Kingdom of God – restoring Hope to a disheartened people. Sketching the lifestyle of that Kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount and then to die on a cross.

And this is what every child of God who makes a profession of faith says in effect: “I offer you myself, promptly and sincerely. I seek to do your will”.

Your faith, my faith, isn't so much a secure transport to a Heaven above at life's end. Instead, faith, profession of faith, is the expression of a passionate, sustained desire to bring something of Jubilee down to earth. Faith sees the Kingdom of God brewing in the darkness of this present age. To fulfill Scripture is to do what God wants done. Every good act, every healing gesture, a hug, a smile, a card, befriending that one who is the outsider, alone, the one addicted to social media, lights a candle of hope in a dark world. The hope we give others is a subtle reminder that there is another way to live in this dog-eat-dog world. Ironically, the hope we give others returns to us in larger measure. Our own faith is energized in the doing, happiness is generated in the giving. And meaning, the deep meaning, of doing good is noticed in the courage to take risks for the sake of this ideal called the Kingdom of God. Others can catch the dream of a better, holier way of life.

Faith refuses to believe that there is nothing that we can do, that the problems are too big, faith refuses to take refuge in blaming others “you made your bed you lie in it”.

Faith says Jubilee is what God wants done. To heal where others harm, to mend where others destroy, to redeem evil turning it to something good. Lighting these small candles of hope -mine to yours and yours to mine begins to show that Christian hope is not an illusion. Sin, evil and the Devil will not have the last word.