

Epiphany 3C – “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” Luke 4.18

The process to become a minister in the Episcopal Church is a prolonged one that lasts for months and even years. The candidate usually expresses his desires to his parish priest who begins the process of discerning his abilities and his sense of call. If all goes well, the candidate passes on to further meetings with the Bishop, the Canon and the Commission on Ministry. Each in their own way is trying to determine the candidate’s fitness for service in the Church. Once the candidate has passed through this initial phase he receives a large file of paperwork. This file contains dozens of pages of questions determining the physical and the psychological fitness of the candidate. My father, a bishop in another communion, took a look at this file and said, “You’d think with that amount of paperwork the Church would be in better shape than it is!”

After answering the questions to the best of his ability the candidate must take this file with him to a medical, a psychiatric and a psychological exam. The doctors must complete their forms within

the file. I had made my appointment with the psychologist that the Diocese had recommended and had all but completed the three day evaluation. On the final day I sat, rather anxiously, across the desk from the psychologist to hear his verdict. Was I competent for ministry? Then came his answer. “I think that anyone that wants to go into the ministry is crazy.” Why, I asked. “Because anyone that thinks that they speak for God must think too highly of themselves. Besides that, anyone who thinks that they have something to say that I really need to hear is a narcissist.” And with that he handed me my file and said, “You passed.”

While we may be forgiven for smiling at this man’s cynical attitude, I believe that he had a very good point. Among all the roles of a minister, it is the preaching role that is the most public. When I am out on the street, wearing my clerical suit and collar, someone will inevitably call me “preacher”. I am not a leader, teacher, counselor, priest or “steward of the mysteries of God”. I am a preacher. I am a member of a class of folk, that includes politicians, that our culture has allowed even expects to stand up at specific times and in specific places and tell people what they think. And this is what draws the

criticism of people like my psychologist. It should be a frightening thing to say, “Thus says the LORD.”

But I have not come to you this morning to preach a sermon about sermons. I would be doomed from the start and you would all be snoozing in your pews. No, I have to come to preach a sermon to you about one sermon in particular: Jesus’ first sermon, his inaugural address, his introduction to his ministry. Here we find the perfect God and the perfect Man met together in his person. Here we might hope to find one who could really give a sermon, anointed as he was by the Holy Ghost and fired by the light of Heaven. And yet, as we shall see, the opinion of his congregation came back, “Who does he think he is, speaking on behalf of God.”

So, first, the preacher and his sermon. Jesus had been commissioned for his ministry as Messiah when he was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. And as he stood praying in the midst of the people the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove and the Father’s voice sounded from Heaven, “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.” Though he was perfect God, and was

not in need of anything, he was also truly man and needed to receive gifts for ministry. Even so the Apostle John wrote, “He whom God has sent utters the words of God, for it is not by measure that he gives the Spirit; the Father loves the Son, and has given all things into his hand.” So Jesus, commissioned and inspired as Messiah, went out into the Wilderness to do battle with the devil for forty days.

And returning victorious he entered the synagogue in his native Galilee to preach. And they heard him gladly and glorified him for his preaching. And on the Sabbath day he came to his own home town, the village of Nazareth, and entered the synagogue to preach. And the attendant gave him the scroll of Isaiah, the greatest Old Testament evangelist. Jesus then opened the scroll to the end of the prophecy and read, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor!” And having read it he sat down and said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!” This, the first sermon of the Savior, was one of the shortest in the history of sermons! What could he have meant?

Jesus said that he was the one whom Isaiah had foretold. Jesus of Nazareth was the fulfillment of Isaiah's oracle. He was no king dressed in fine robes or a priest vested in holy garments. He wasn't even a wild eyed prophet like his cousin John the Baptist. He was the hometown kid who had done odd jobs with his father. But he claimed Isaiah had been thinking of him when he wrote these words. And what evidence did he have for such a mighty claim? He had received God's own Spirit, his first and best gift. The Lord has anointed me, and he has sent me to preach.

And what was he to preach? First, he was to preach good news to the poor. The poor had always been special objects of the Lord's attention. David wrote in his Psalms, "All my bones shall say," O LORD, who is like you, delivering the poor from him who is too strong for him, the poor and needy from him who robs him?" And again St. James wrote, that God has, "chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom." The poor who struggle for food, for safety, for justice have the honor and privilege of receiving the Lord and his Messiah. It is for them that he has come to preach the good news of the gospel.

But the poor are not the only congregation to hear this sermon. No, Jesus says that he has come to preach release to the captives and liberty to the oppressed. We should not forget in our praise of Jesus, the Messiah, to whom this prophecy had been originally made. Isaiah had proclaimed the joy of release to the ones he had warned about their impending doom. The Israelites had rebelled against the Lord their God, and he had committed them to exile in a far off land. But Isaiah concluded by showing them the end of the story. Though their sins be as crimson, he would wash them as white as snow. Though they be bound in chains and dragged away to Babylon, yet would he seek them out and restore them to their land.

But truly, Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonians were no match to the greater taskmaster that Jesus had come to destroy. So John tells us that Jesus told the Pharisees, “Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not continue in the house for ever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” Yes, sin is a great task master that breaks the body and drives out joy. But there is another who is greater still. It is Death itself. Death, that

great enemy of God who brought life to the whole world. Death, which is the payment of sin. Death, which comes to all the children of the first Adam who rebelled in the Garden. But Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Christ shall deliver the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death... O death where is thy victory? O death where is thy sting? But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” It is Jesus, the one who had come to fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy, who preaches release to all those who are captive to sin, death and the Devil. All those who have been broken to pieces in this world by their own sins and by the oppression of authorities in this world have hope in him. He would take it upon himself and fight on their behalf, not with the sword, but upon the cross. This would be the Jubilee year, the acceptable year of the Lord. This would be the time when freedom would reign, slavery would be put to an end, debts would be forgiven, and inheritances returned to their rightful owners. Jesus claimed that it had all come in him.

So much for the preacher and his sermon. Yet there is always another party when sermons are preached. The congregation must respond to the message of the preacher, whether heavenly or human. So we see that when Jesus finished his reading that all the crowd fixed their eyes upon him and waited to hear him with great expectation. How often are we less than attentive when it comes to hearing a sermon preached? We are surrounded by sermons: on the radio, on TV, and the internet. Crowds come out to see the popular preachers in football stadiums and concert halls. Yet we become tired of hearing the sermon. We struggle with sermon fatigue. And we forget that if the preacher is faithful to the word of God then he is God's agent speaking to us. It is not he, sinner like you and me, that is speaking but the mighty God to us. Let us not be lazy or disinterested, but instead be like the centurion Cornelius who called Peter to his home ready to hear all that he had been commanded to say by the Lord.

But after the congregation had anxiously listened to him, they were surprised and even offended by him. "Is not this Joseph's son", they said to themselves. A prophet is not accepted in his own home. Why? Because everyone knows who they are and what they were like before

they had been called to prophesy. Preachers are supposed to be like Charleston Heston in “The 10 Commandments” with eyes aflame and hair blowing in the wind. No one is supposed to see preachers in greasy shorts taking out the trash on Saturday morning. No, people are too much convinced by the manner and appearance of the preacher instead of the message they bear from the word of God. Will you not hear them if they bring the charge of sins committed? Will you not hear them when they bring the comforting message of sins remitted at the cross? Will you not rejoice with them when they proclaim that there is no king but Jesus? Will you not clap your hands to hear that there is a new creation and that Jesus has made it so?

But the congregation that day was not content to listen and then be surprised and offended. No, they passed on and became indignant and angry and attempted to kill the preacher. Jesus convicted them of their indifference and accused them of being strangers to the love of God. They would not hear him and they spoke of murder that day. We may not know of many who kill their preachers, but there are many who claim the name of Christ who will refuse to hear the word of God. It is no light to their path but is instead a stumbling block to them.

Let us not be like that! Instead, let us see Jesus Christ offered to us even as he was bodily to the congregation in the synagogue that day. For he is still, and always shall be, the anointed one of Almighty God. He has received the Holy Ghost and a commission to put away our poverty and give us an eternal inheritance. He is still the one who speaks and the captives spring free of their chains. He is the enemy of oppression and champion of righteousness. He is still the King of Peace. Instead, let us receive him with open hearts and glad minds. Now is the acceptable day of the Lord. AMEN.