

January 23 2022: The Third Sunday of Epiphany

[Isaiah 61: 1-4]; Luke 4: 14-21

‘The Synagogue at Nazareth’ - Michael Brown

What Happens in Today’s Gospel?

In today’s Gospel reading, it’s the Sabbath. As a devout Jew brought up by devout parents, Jesus would attend the synagogue service whenever he could. Was that service like our church service?

Would We Recognise What Happened in the Synagogue?

We would certainly recognise elements of the synagogue service. There would be readings from Scripture probably using a lectionary as we do. The first reading would be from the Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy) followed by a second reading from the Prophets. Although the first reading was set, it isn’t clear that the second was.

Lesson Readers?

Who would give these readings? Was there a rota? Remembering that the literacy rate was around 10%, there would only be small number of people able to read anyway. Reading in the synagogue would be more difficult than reading business letters. A scroll doesn’t have chapter or verse numbers. It has to be rolled to find the place.

Jesus Reads the Lesson

When ‘*He [Jesus] stood up to read*’, was he volunteering or was this arranged in advance? It could have been either. As this was Jesus’ home village, he may have been invited to read. ‘*...The scroll...was given to him*’ may suggest that it was ready

for him at the opening verse. If so, this raises further intriguing questions. Did Jesus deliberately choose the passage from Isaiah or was it after all a set reading?

Was There a Sermon?

What about a sermon? *‘The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him’*. There was a custom that the reader might give some sort of commentary or address on the lesson he’d just read out. This would be delivered sitting down which is why the implications of the verse *‘And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.’*, may not be immediately clear to us. The congregation couldn’t know for certain what was coming next. Had Jesus sat down waiting for the service to move on or was he sat down waiting to speak?

What Happened Next?

But, of course, they weren’t just waiting to see if any “visiting preacher” was about to speak. They were waiting to see whether Jesus *‘filled with the power of the Spirit’* was going to say something. And Jesus’ reputation had gone before him. *‘He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.’* Some people might have only heard about Jesus; some people would have known him from boyhood; and some people would have both heard him and have known him. Putting all of this together would have produced a high level of expectation and curiosity.

Was that service like our church service, then?

Just to pause and sum up, so far what we’ve seen suggests we wouldn’t feel that a synagogue service was completely outside of our worshiping experience. But as for what happens next, well!

‘...he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

If anyone read a lesson at St Andrew’s and then made such a pronouncement, it’s hard to predict whether the congregation would more likely to be puzzled, confused

or concerned for the welfare of the speaker, or perhaps all three. (But would these be the only reactions or even the correct reactions? - We shall see!)

What about the Congregation at Nazareth?

But the congregation at Nazareth might have reacted in a completely different way. In fact, some of them might have been at least hoping for these words or even expecting them. ‘...*He began to say*’ - our set reading only gives the beginning of what Jesus said, not what he went on to say. And it is what follows that annoyed people, not how Jesus starts off.

What Jesus Said

Jesus’ opening remarks would have been regarded as not only acceptable but almost necessary. No ordinary person is ‘*filled with the power of the Spirit*’ in the way that Jesus was when he returned to his hometown. Given what he had been doing, he needed to say something about himself.

Who Is This Jesus? - Waiting for An Answer

Was ‘pronouncement’ an exaggeration? Not at all - it was used deliberately. It was quite usual for a charismatic figure such as one of the prophets, or more recently John the Baptist, to make a formal statement as to his identity. This was a reminder that God had acted through his authorised representative for his people. It was a way of saying, ‘These amazing things that are happening are not for my credit but for the glory of God.’

Who are the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed?

When Luke depicts Jesus quoting from Isaiah, the word Luke uses for 'poor' is the same word he will use later on in the story of the beggar Lazarus lying at the Rich Man's gate. This is 'poor' as in as low down the economic scale as it is possible to get. And in the same way, we can take 'captives', 'blind', 'oppressed' as referring to people who are afflicted in social and physical terms. Freedom from all of these states of servitude is a sign of the dawning of the Messianic Age.

The Problem *and* The Solution

But, did Jesus mean that his message would only be for the desperately poor, etc. If he did, then what he said in the synagogue at Nazareth would not have applied to many of those present. And this is a persistent problem for most UK Christians today. If we aren't poor, is the Gospel not for us? The response that the Gospels also speak of the 'poor in spirit' is often derided as an easy way out. But do we believe that Jesus turns away anyone who realises that they are as low in the spiritual scale as they can get, or that they are captive to soul destroying fantasies, or that their lifestyle is harming them or that they are oppressed by circumstances they could change?

And the churches of God are filled with people who can say:

'The Spirit of the Lord has been upon me'

'This scripture has been fulfilled in my own life.'

AMEN