

A Kingdom for All — 1

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Third Sunday after the Epiphany—24 January 2016
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Introduction

I like following American presidential elections. The present one is a doozy. I am thinking about Mr. Trump. He keeps on giving, generating loathing on the one hand and delirious delight on the other. His political marriage to Sarah Palin is only the latest. One commentator this week quoted Martin Luther King's aphorism, "...nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity." (Elizabeth Farrelly, SMH 21/1/16 p.20)

However, and not wishing to discuss party politics of the American kind, whatever you think of him he is very good at this business of electioneering. And he is good at it because he has a simple rhetorical device used right down through the ages and he uses it to great effect.

First he diagnoses the situation: America is in decline.

In describing America this way, he taps into a vast well of discontent, as much of Republican Middle America thinks that their country is on the wrong track, which not true by any stretch of the imagination.

Then he proposes a solution: Let's make America great again.

Trust me and I will get it done. He appeals to his business dealings as his authority, and not much else, supported by a can-do attitude that appeals to his particular audience. Solutions appear simple. He appeals to ignorance, intolerance, xenophobia and people's helplessness. He must put the story he wants people to hear within the bigger story of America.

Finally, he puts all this in the public arena and the hearers make their call.

He writes books, gives speeches, does great TV. The hearers make their call: In opinion polls but it soon it will be the primary voters and if that is successful then the election poll.

This is an ancient and well-known rhetorical path and Luke does something similar at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus is entering into the first major phase of his work, centred in Galilee (14-15). I hope you will spot the differences between Mr. Trump and Jesus, who, in one of his publications says that he has great relationship with God but does not need forgiveness because "I am good. I don't do a lot of things that are bad."

After his baptism Jesus and the coming of the Spirit on him while at prayer Jesus has been teaching in synagogues and his actions showed that the power of the Spirit was with him. In and around the towns and villages of Galilee he strikes a chord with people.

Luke tells us that just as Jesus went up from the baptism to confront the devil, now in the power of the Spirit he goes up (same word) to Nazareth. There he attends synagogue reads the good news for the day from Isaiah and sits down to preach a sermon.

The text of the sermon 18-19

The other Gospel writers Mark and Matthew place the rejection at Nazareth later in the ministry. But Luke wants to start with a story that gives a clear statement of Jesus' intentions, an exemplar to which we must return again and again if we wish to grasp what Jesus is up to. It becomes a window through which we can read the ministry.

Everyone who operates in the public arena has to put forward their authority for what they want to do. It may be educational or ideological or personal charisma. The basis of Jesus' authority is two-fold: Scripture and the Spirit all soaked in prayer.

The OT readings from Nehemiah 8 and from the Psalm 19 reflect the role of Scripture and its interpretation (Neh.8) and application in the life of Jewish people after the exile. By Jesus' day Scripture played a central role in synagogues along with interpretation, although many of the details of synagogue worship at this time remain foggy.

What matters is the role of the Scripture; to guide and govern the lives of people providing wisdom, enlightenment, revival of soul, and rejoicing (Ps. 19). They provide warning signals on the path of the pilgrim people of God, keeping evil from entirely overcoming them.

Christians have inherited that and continue the tradition to this day. Look at us this morning. Anglicanism, especially in its daily offices and Morning and Evening Prayer, its use of praise and Scripture is deeply embedded in the synagogue model.

If Jesus was to have any authority and legitimacy among the people he had to put his mission in the context of God's great story. He had to show them where the story was headed. He had to show that he was not telling another story, but a story consistent with the one they knew, beginning with Abraham.

As we know he was not alone in doing this and time would show that other visions of the story would whether from Herod or Pharisees or Zealots would contest his telling. But tell it he must. He must show that his version of the story fits with the story told so far in Scripture. It must fit it.

Jesus needs not only authority or legitimacy. It no good having those if you have no power. So where does his power come from? It is obviously not military might or political genius or a civil uprising.

It is from the Spirit. That is crucial to Jesus' story and to Luke's telling of it. It is critical also for the church.

Now we know who Jesus is and what is his power and authority for his mission; the Holy Spirit. This is his epiphany. By his uncompromising obedience to his call from God he will establish justice and peace for the whole world in the power of the Spirit.

But what we will find in this Gospel and in the Acts, as we have read today in 1 Corinthians 12, the Spirit empowers the church, the people of God, the disciples in their roles as bearers of the message of the kingdom. That is why Luke writes both parts of his work. The same Spirit that empowers Jesus now empowers his people.

The Holy Spirit is the promise of the Age to Come. But the Spirit is here. The Age to Come is here. God's future is now in our present. The Spirit makes the future real now.

In the Spirit heaven and earth are joined together. We become the place where heaven and earth meet both personally and corporately. The temple has been replaced. Those whom God's Spirit anoints are God's dwelling place, God's temple. That is why the sacraments are not just mere pictures. God's presence is embedded in and among us in the Spirit.

The text is from Isaiah 61.1-2 (some from 58.6 as well). And it puts Jesus' ministry in the context of God's great purposes for the world: Telling the poor that the direction of the forces at play is about to change.

To bring good news is to tell of a victory won, a superior force overcome, something dramatic changing the situation so that we can all breathe again, come out of our bunkers and live without fear. It is to say the war is over.

Remember the Magnificat? He has scattered the proud...he has brought down the powerful...he has sent the rich away empty...he has lifted up the lowly...he has filled the hungry with good things...this reiterates the idea.

We confine the poor to the economically disadvantaged but in the Bible it refers to those who live outside the circles of acceptance, economically poor or not. They are the ones excluded from human fellowship. It was a catch all idea and included those excluded from social and religious intercourse because of any number or combination of factors, such as gender, age, destitution, physical malady or religious impurity.

The rest of the text expands that by giving examples; captives, blind oppressed.

The underlying good news is that they are released. Something is about to happen that will set them free; forgiveness from sin so relationships can be restored; human wholeness restored as people are set free from diabolic powers and release from debts, as in relationships characterized by debt and obligations to one's betters.

The sermon 20-23

Jesus rolls up the scroll hands it back to the attendant and sits down. Everyone waits with baited breath. Quietness. And in 10 seconds he sets the world alight.

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing?”

The centuries of waiting are over. Here I am. What I am to show you changes everything.

I want you to reflect how bizarre that might sound to an audience. What if I said something like it? I know what you might think and I might expect a visit from the wardens, pastorally concerned no doubt, but with a suggestion of a quiet break and a rethink of our present arrangements.

The centuries of waiting are over he is saying and God is acting and I am the intersection of God's action and human life.

The response of the synagogue congregation we will explore more closely next week. But at first it was favourable. He brought words graciously spoken but also full of the mercy and kindness of God. Maybe there was good news.

Conclusion

So what are we to make of all this? Standing as it does deliberately placed here by Luke to be the paradigm of ministry for Jesus and disciples.

Have you spotted the differences with Mr. Trump?

You and I are disciples of this man. What are we doing that reflects his vision of God's good news? What is your response?