

Christ Church Cranbrook
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
Sermon for January 27, 2013 ~ Epiphany 3C
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

After God's people returned from the Babylonian captivity to their homeland, with Nehemiah as their governor, the rule of God's Law and the pattern of God's worship had to be re-established. Ezra, their priest and scribe unrolled the scroll and taught the people who had returned from exile what it meant for them to be Jews living in Jerusalem and what it meant for them to be God's own people. They had lost some important elements of their identity and vocation during the years in exile. He was calling God's people to return not just to their homeland, but also to their sacred mission.

St. Paul was trying to do something similar in writing his First Letter to the Corinthians; only his audience was different from that of Ezra. Paul addressed a church he established, whose members were not Jews but gentiles. This new faith was not something that was a part of their heritage. It was something new and the people were having conflicts about spiritual gifts. Paul struggled to get them to allow the law written on their hearts by the Holy Spirit to draw them together instead of driving them apart. They weren't there just to feel holy; they were there to pursue a mission and Paul was attempting to teach them how.

In the case of the people gathered that day in the Nazareth synagogue, it was Jesus who had been away. We can only imagine what they were expecting from the son of Joseph and Mary who had returned home to deliver what may have been his first sermon in his hometown synagogue. He had been teaching in the synagogues of nearby communities and his reputation was spreading. Would he bring a message to assure them that they were still in God's grace, one that would reinforce the status quo, one that would warm their hearts? And, what do you suppose Jesus expected from them?

He was asked to read the lesson from the prophets. So, Jesus stood up, unrolled the scroll, and in a voice strong with anticipation, he read aloud these words of the Prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (Isaiah 61:1, 2).

When he finished with this passage, Jesus rolled up the scroll, returned it to the attendant, and sat down. It was the custom for teachers to sit, rather than to stand, so when Jesus sat, everyone looked at him, expecting some commentary, some explication of this text, one that was very familiar to many of them.

He looked around at those familiar faces from his early years, his childhood friends, the parents of his friends, people who were his neighbors. “The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him,” says the text. And what did he have to say once he had their undivided attention?

He began his sermon with a declaration that must have taken their breath away. Here is what he said: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

What was so surprising or shocking about that was that he claimed those ancient prophetic words of Isaiah as his own personal mission statement. The reason God's Spirit descended on him at his baptism was to empower him to do exactly what Isaiah said: “bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind; let all the oppressed go free; announce the Year of Jubilee when God's justice will reshape their lives.

Jesus announced this as his personal mission statement, and everything that followed in his life and ministry was the living out of the prophecy he claimed for himself that Sabbath day in his hometown.

Saying surprising things like this caused difficulties for Jesus and the religious establishment. I heard of a university chaplain who preached a sermon in the university chapel one day in which his theme was “Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild.” After the service, a student approached the chaplain and said, “Chaplain, your sermon was well-delivered, moving, and obviously from the heart. But what I want to know is if Jesus was such a nice guy, how did he manage to get himself crucified?”

He continued to do and say things like this and it led to the cross, the grave, and the resurrection. But that’s not the whole story. We are. Those words of Isaiah and of Jesus were intended as much for you and me as for those people in that synagogue in Nazareth. That mission of Jesus has been entrusted to us, the Church, his body. And, by that, I do not mean the Church has a mission; I mean the mission has a Church.

The way Jesus pursues his mission today is through his mystical body, the Church. Through us and all who are baptized into his body, Jesus continues to live out his mission statement, bringing good news to those who don’t have any, setting free those chained in captivity, opening blind eyes, helping the oppressed and exploited find a life, and showing us God’s reign where justice and peace prevail.

Jesus still does these things, because his Church does them. That’s what this annual meeting is about today! The election of leaders, presentation of reports on our mission and ministries, and recognition of the service of our sisters and brothers. We do this so that, through us, “the poor gain hope, whether it’s their souls or their bodies that are starved. The captives experience freedom, whether they are prisoners in a jail or prisoners in a mansion. The blind receive sight, whether it’s cataract surgery at the church hospital or the scales of prejudice falling off the eyes of a bigot. The oppressed are set free, whether oppression is a political regime or a chemical dependence. When Jesus reads that passage in the Nazareth synagogue, he announces a mission statement for himself and for his body, the Church.” *

Paul’s message to the Corinthians is built upon the foundation Jesus laid that day in Nazareth. The Body of Christ, the Church, is to live out the mission statement of Jesus. As we endeavor to remain faithful to those words Jesus read and lived, we can pay attention to four points that St. Paul insists on in that passage.

All the members of the Church have gifts for ministry.
The members of the Church have different gifts for ministry.
That diversity is necessary for the mission.
Those different gifts come to life in the context of our corporate life in Christ.

Jesus read Isaiah’s words and embraced them as his the purpose of his life. We are called to do the same. I invite you to repeat after me, sentence by sentence:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us.
The Spirit of the Lord has anointed us to bring good news to the poor.
The Spirit of the Lord has sent us to proclaim release to the captives.
The Spirit of the Lord has sent us to help the blind recover their sight.
The Spirit of the Lord has sent us to free the oppressed.
The Spirit of the Lord has sent us to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing. Amen. *

** Suggested in a sermon on these texts by the Rev. Charles Hoffacker*