

Christ the King, Claremont

Third Sunday after Epiphany

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Good News to the Poor as a Wellspring of Divine Grace

Luke 4:16-21

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Following his Baptism by John, in the River Jordan, Jesus is driven to the wilderness to be tested and face temptation by the devil. After moments of struggle and deep searching in the wilderness, Jesus triumphs over evil and returns to his hometown, Nazareth, ‘in the power of the Holy Spirit.’ Amidst rumours and acclaims of his return, across Nazareth, Jesus enters the Synagogue on the Sabbath, stands up to read, and the scroll of Prophet Isaiah is handed over to him. He unrolls the scroll till he found the place whose prophecy matched the occasion and began to read with a bold prophetic acclamation:

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 favour

The present words capture and summarise Jesus’ prophetic vision that will embody his divine mission forever, as he begins his ministry in Nazareth. As many biblical experts have remarked, “few passages in the gospel have said so much by saying so little.” Indeed, in his quoting of Isaiah’s prophecy, Jesus of Luke has been able to ‘say so much by saying so little’ but sufficient enough to win the hearing of the audience. The saying had great impact in the synagogue that upon reading the passage, while “[t]he eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him, as he rolls up the scroll and sits down Jesus offers a dramatic proclamation as he locates himself in the story, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing (Mark 4:20-21). The present stance is a Lukan way of sharing the story of salvation in a manifesto that gives posture and direction to what Jesus intends to accomplish in his divine mission to the world, as God’s anointed Son and Messiah. In taking on the mantle of the Lord’s anointing, Jesus inhabits Israel’s sacred texts with both imagination and authority. With intricate and sweeping connections, Jesus is harnessing the prophetic vision of Isaiah 61 and also invoking the weight of Torah in Leviticus 25. Empowered by the Spirit, Jesus’ identification with the Lord’s Anointed One is fulfilling the long-awaited hopes of Israel. As herald of God’s impending reign, Jesus uses messianic language to announce the good news of God’s story breaking into the present. This story is essentially good news for the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed - all of whom understood the experience of exclusion made critical by the pangs of social and economic poverty in the ancient world. In the new story that God is writing, in and through the person and life of Jesus, the poor and the socially outcast take centre stage as springboards of divine grace. The final proclamation – “the year of the Lord’s favour (Luke 4:19) – evokes the language of Jubilee, a sign of holy liberation for all God’s people that was intended to be practised as a year of Sabbath (Leviticus 25:10). As Jesus looks ahead to the creative vision of renewal that will shape his ministry, he does by reaching back into Israel’s tradition and appealing to the Law and the Prophets. But as he does so, Jesus also sees the old texts in a new light and he is creatively weaving a new strand

into the story, so ancient and new, that connects so realistically to the original fabric that has been there all along.

Depending on the style and purpose of every theologian, the trajectory of Jesus' ministry is a complex and difficult one to apprehend. Portraying Jesus as the fulfilment of the prophecy and the Torah in the hearing of the audience, as Jesus reads the prophetic text, is Luke's major purpose in the gospel. Luke works out Mark's story to suit this purpose. Luke is the only theologian who locates the beginning of Jesus' mission right at the behest of Jesus' hometown, Nazareth. Both Matthew and Mark, though include Nazareth in their narratives, only mention Nazareth in passing, after evoking Jesus' many deeds of power and grace. The theological irony of the present proclamation is so authentic and real, as it locates Jesus right at the centre of Israel's prophetic proclamation and messianic tradition. It is only Luke who locates Nazareth as the heartbeat of Jesus' mission and the launching premise of his divine manifesto. As Jesus looks back and forth, appealing to the ancient texts, the Prophets and the Law, as points of departure in his prophetic proclamation; reading between the lines, what Luke seems to appeal to the readers of his gospel cannot be difficult to ascertain. For Luke, human experience is the wellspring of divine grace and context is critical in the articulation and understanding of divine grace, hence the wellspring of faith. The place of one's birth is a holy ground because it is the point in which God enters the world and sets the tone of divine drama of incarnation through the pangs and agonies of one's birth. It is through the place of one's birth and upbringing where God enters the world and shares our human history. Where one's umbilical cord lies is the seedbed of one's faith. We should begin at the place of our own birth and upbringing because it is there where God becomes incarnate, begins to become like us, moulding us to become the manifestation and epiphany of his presence in the world. It is in the place of our own birth where God enters the world, embraces our humanity, and identifies himself with the human experience of despair, pain, and agony and transforms this experience into a wellspring of grace.

Redressing the Plight of the Poor as a Wellspring of Divine Grace

As Jesus embraces Isaiah 61:1 as a key text in his divine manifesto, we should be mindful of the fact that Isaiah's prophecy was originally intended to bring healing and solace to the broken heartedness of captivity. Scholars share that even after the captivity was technically over, the experience of pain and despair could not go away. Those returning to Jerusalem from Babylonian exile, as well as those who remained in the traumatic aftermath of foreign occupation, experienced a kind of a 'postexilic exile.' The experience of exile has been a painful one, a lingering sense of loss and desolation in the wake of Israel's defeat and humiliation was hard to bear. Thus, Isaiah's words of comfort are a timely vision of hope "to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to prisoners (Isaiah 61:1) is truly good and healing news for those whose hearts need solace. The gospel herald in Isaiah goes on to provide "a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning. The mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit" (Isaiah 61:3). By embracing the good news of God's deliverance, the pain and grief of exile are being transformed into a joyful recognition of Yahweh's saving grace. In the words of Prophet Isaiah, people who are rooted in that hopeful transformation are like 'oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory" (Isaiah 61:3). The end result of this journey from mournful captivity to joyful liberation is a restored community. As it was in the society of Jesus' day, poverty remains the greatest threat to God's plan in the word even to this day. Poverty dehumanises and marginalises people. One of the greatest challenges besieging the African continent is poverty and South

Africa cannot be an exception. Given the scourge of poverty the gains of democracy and the values of constitutional democracy are increasingly put to test. Redressing the plight of the poor is, according to Luke, a wellspring of divine grace because poverty may compromise or undermine any policy direction aimed at promoting human wellbeing. Amen