

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C), January 28, 2007

Readings: Jer. 1:4-5, 17-19; Ps. 71; 1 Cor. 12:31-13:13; Lk. 4:21-30

Resisting Good News; Accepting Good News

Today's gospel passage tells us of the conclusion of Jesus's very first sermon and some of its aftermath. We heard some of the content of that sermon last week. Jesus enters his home town synagogue. He is handed the scroll and reads from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." Rolling up the scroll, he looks at his fellow Nazarenes and speaks the words that we read at the beginning of today's gospel passage: "Today, this scripture passage is being fulfilled in your hearing." There and then, in his home town of Nazareth, he announces he is bringing liberty to those in jail and healing to all who are in sickbeds. He has good news for all the downtrodden and for all poor people.

What a beginning! Health for the sick, jails unlocked, freedom for the poor: the beginning of a new, much more just society. At first, the sermon has a powerful impact on Jesus' fellow Nazarenes. Luke tells us "All spoke highly of him and they were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips." The deep longings of the people of Israel—for health, freedom from poverty, justice that Isaiah put into words—these longings were being met by Jesus, right there and then in Nazareth. And Jesus's people responded with joy and enthusiasm.

But today's gospel passage tells us this is not the whole story. Suddenly the mood changes. The people seem surprised to hear this from a "home town" boy. "Isn't this the son of Joseph?" The rejection escalates as Jesus reads their thoughts and quotes a well-known proverb, "No prophet is accepted in his own native place." The people of Nazareth seem think his message is entirely too radical. They want a more domesticated Jesus. Indeed the reading has overtones of violence. The people end not only rejecting of Jesus, but trying to kill him. They try to throw him over a cliff. But, this time, he is able to escape until another day.

This story says a lot about our own responses to Jesus. His message of healing for the sick and freedom for oppressed people speaks to our deep longings just as they did to the people of Nazareth, and we often respond with joy and enthusiasm. But like them, we also resist. Some of us reject the message completely. All of us hesitate to accept the message wholeheartedly.

Why? The easy answer is that we are bad people. But I think our resistance is a more complicated issue than that. Just as the Nazarenes know Jesus too well to accept his words, we find it hard to believe that Jesus could really bring healing and freedom and justice in the midst our everyday lives. Or, we may think this too good to be believable at all. Realists don't take that sort of thing seriously. Desire for the familiar and a certain kind of "realism" can hold us back from accepting Jesus's good news.

I think there is also a deeper root to these hesitations—fear. The message Jesus proclaims is really quite disruptive—it can turn our lives and our world upside down. Imagine: healing the sick, setting captives free, bringing justice to the poor and oppressed. This can make trouble. And it is easy to see how the idea that our lives could be disrupted leads to fear. Such fear makes us resist.

This gives us a clue to how we can overcome our resistance. We need to overcome fear of the disruption the gospel can bring. How? We could start by listening to the first reading's reassurance to Jeremiah when he fears God's call will lead him into danger. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you." Do not be afraid! "I am with you to deliver you."

In other words, we can let the disruptive message of the gospel into our lives because God's protection and care for us is deeper than any disruption the gospel will bring. Jesus knew that the message he proclaimed was disruptive. In fact, his words lead to his death on the cross. But even deeper than the disruption of the cross, God's love enabled Jesus to go forward. In the end, God's total love for him drew him out of the grave into full life in the resurrection. We, too, can trust God's love for us. A deep trust in God's love for us can overcome our fear that Jesus's words will turn our lives upside down. That trust can help us accept the Good News we long for. Let's pray together for that trust now.