

## THE WORD OF THE LORD

### 3 Epiphany – January 25, 2003 – Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

What truly gives Christian people meaning and purpose? Thomas Long, in his commentary on today's lesson (Pulpit Resource) says that we are to look in our Holy Scriptures. He says that God's spirit brings the Holy Scripture to life in our time. What gives us meaning and purpose is Jesus. It is Jesus who is the present and active power of God working in our midst now. Dr. Long believes it is vital for each generation to understand and interpret our meaning in light of what is on the pages of the Bible.

The Gospel of Luke lesson today speaks about the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It is the "inaugural speech" of our Lord. We see a pattern established here that will be replayed over and over in the New Testament. Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit; he travels to some place; a situation is described; and, Jesus acts. This very model might be one for us as Christians to follow ourselves.

Another remarkable thing that happens in today's reading is that Jesus goes home. He has come back to the place of his youth. It's his hometown, Nazareth. There is nothing special or powerful about this place. It is a small, unimportant town in Galilee. Jesus comes to the synagogue, like one of our family returning home for a visit. It's a normal thing to do. You go to Church. Jesus is asked to read the Scripture of the day. The shape of worship in Jesus' time is reflected in our worship. There is a gathering, prayers, psalms, Biblical readings and a sermon. This day in Nazareth, the local boy come home has been asked to read and comment.

However, it is in the midst of this average routine that the unexpected happens! Jesus reads from the Prophet Isaiah. Out of the ordinary comes the extraordinary! Jesus boldly says that the vision of Isaiah, the Scripture, is fulfilled! What an astounding statement! Isaiah spoke in a time when Jerusalem was being restored, when the Temple was being rebuilt. The Israelites had returned from exile. Now Jesus says that he is the fulfillment of Scripture! In this, we come to hear that God expects fullness in Jesus' ministry. There are no excuses, no reduction in programs, no cut backs. Jesus does not come to say he will do less or to say things will be the same!

Jesus reads from a portion of Isaiah that lays out a vision of God's promises. Let's take a moment or two to touch on what the prophet says and understand what shape Jesus' ministry will take. Jesus' ministry will be "in the Spirit." This means his words and deeds are intimately connected with God's presence and activity. When we see Jesus, we see God at work. Jesus will "proclaim good news to the poor." His ministry expresses God's intention to reverse our world order. Jesus is not about power, status or wealth. He is bringing something new, especially to the people on the fringes of society.

Jesus' ministry will "bring release to the captives." This is not just a reference to political prisoners being freed. Jesus will work to shatter the chains and bonds that enslave all of us. He will bring about a truly free way for us to serve God. Jesus' ministry will bring "recover of sight" to the blind. This is not just a reference to the healing ministry that he will perform. Jesus will enable us to see God, possess God's vision and understand God's will.

Jesus' ministry will bring "freedom for the oppressed." We often think of others being oppressed. The truth is many people are enslaved to sin, guilt, grief, anxiety, fear or something

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else. Jesus will bring us God's love, forgiveness, hope and new life. All of us will be freed from the shackles of whatever oppresses us. Finally, Jesus will bring about "the year of the Lord's favor." This is a reference to the Old Testament concept of Jubilee. Every 75 years, the Israelites were to celebrate Jubilee. It was a new start for the people. Debts were cancelled (could you stand to have all your debts erased?). Slaves were freed. There was no concept of owning forever. The land was returned to the original owners. This was not an affirmation of any political, economic or governmental policy. It was a new start ... meant to reflect the new start God gives us. Jesus' ministry will be marked by a similar new start for all he encounters.

What do we expect when we encounter the Word of God? In our liturgy, after the readings, we expect a sermon. I don't necessarily think what we are receiving a word from God. As a matter of fact, we really don't want to hear from God. The Word of God is disruptive! Do you remember in the Bible what happens when an angel, a messenger from God, encounters a human? The response is fear. People are afraid to hear what God has to say, probably with good reason!

The Word of God comes speaking something new is about to happen. God speaks that things are going to change ... and that usually means us! We desire God's presence, but we fear it. We want the Word, but we don't want it. I think that we want the word as long as it doesn't place any demands on us, when it doesn't expect a change of us, or when it doesn't demand we do something. However, this is not how the word of God operates.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams talks about being in New York City on September 11, 2001. He and several other clergy were gathered in a recording studio near the World Trade Center. They had come to tape a two-hour broadcast on spirituality. It was suppose to be a routine day ... and it was, until the planes struck the Twin Towers. September 11<sup>th</sup> was an interruption in Rowan Williams, and our, life.

Rowan Williams spent a great deal of time reflecting upon that interruption. As he thought about that dreadful day, he came to some conclusions that he put in his book "Writing in the Dust after September 11<sup>th</sup>." What Williams said was that our words about God only confirm the status quo. He added that our religious language often shields us from the reality of God. Williams went on to say that our words and language too often blind us to human suffering and our own sinfulness. Williams concluded that our religious talking, seeing and knowing needs cleansing. We need to rethink how we approach the Word of God.

What is the presence behind the word of God? Rowan Williams talks about a visit to an Orthodox Monastery 12 years ago (Sewanee Theological Review, Pentecost 2003). He made a grand tour of the huge Church. A monk then took him on a tour of the smaller, older chapels. He came to one and sensed a place full of prayer and memory. The monk pulled the curtain aside at the chapel. Behind the curtain stood a small, plain altar. On it was an old, darkened and simple picture of Jesus.

It is Jesus who is at the heart of all our words and worship. Behind the curtain of our anxieties, fears, theories, struggles and suspicions he is there. Jesus is just there, as God promises. There is not anything we can do about it because God has already done it. Nothing of value happens

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in the Church that doesn't start from seeing Jesus in our midst. It is Jesus who transforms our suffering and disaster. It is Jesus who brings love, forgiveness and new life. If we don't know why this matters, we need to look for someone who does. Rowan Williams says we can ask a child, the poor, the forgotten or the lost. We can learn from them. We can learn what it means that Jesus is the Word of God.

In closing, I would like to share a story that was on the internet. It helps me to understand the presence that is behind the word of God. A little boy visited his grandparent's farm. When he arrived, he was given a new toy to play with ... a slingshot. He ran off into the woods in joy to practice. However, about a short while it became clear that he did not know how to master it. He couldn't hit anything. The little boy became discouraged.

It was time for lunch, so he began walking back to the house. There in the yard was his grandma's pet duck! Well, you know what happened. He picked up a stone, aimed and let it fly! The stone hit the duck, and killed it. Immediately the little boy was filled with panic! He nervously looked around then took the dead duck and hid it in a woodpile. As he walked towards the house, there was his sister. She said nothing, she just stood there.

After lunch, Grandma said, "Sally, let's do the dishes." "Oh no!" She answered. "Johnny said that he wanted to help!" Sally walked by Johnny and whispered to him, "Remember the duck?" Johnny resigned himself to doing the dishes. Later that day, Grandpa said, "Let's go fishing!" Grandma said, "Sally, aren't you going to help me prepare dinner?" "Oh no!" She smiled. "Johnny said that he wanted to help." Sally smirked as she walked past Johnny and hissed, "Remember the duck?" Johnny hung his head and headed off into the kitchen.

After a couple of days, Johnny couldn't stand it. It was the combination of doing both his sister's and his chores coupled with a growing sense of guilt. Johnny went to Grandma, crying, and confessed that he had killed the duck. Grandma bent down and hugged the boy. She kissed him on the forehead and said, "I know. I saw it all. I was standing at the window." A startled and surprised look came over Johnny. Grandma continued, "But I love you. And I forgive you. I was just wondering how long you would let Sally make a slave of you."

How long will we be enslaved to our world and the culture. How long will we let others hold something over us? How long will we be controlled by fear? How long will we carry guilt, or despair, or grief, or anxiety, or more? The Word of God has come into our lives and into the world. It has come in the presence of Jesus Christ. He says that we are loved. We are forgiven. We have the promise and gift of new life. God expects a change from us. How long will we put it off?

The Word of God asks us to do some things. We are to listen. We are to respond. We are to change. And finally, we are to go into the world and act as the people of God. We are people who are called to be shaped by the Word of God. Think about what that word means when we say, "The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!" What will you do?