

Advent 3

December 14, 2008

If the opening sentences of today's first reading from Isaiah 61 sound familiar to you, please do not be surprised. They are also to be found in Luke's Gospel, ch. 4, when Jesus returns to his home town of Nazareth, goes to the synagogue and is called upon to read from the Scriptures. This is the passage he is given to read: "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, etc." And when he is finished reading and hands the scroll back to the attendant and sits down, he says: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

What does Jesus mean when he tells his hearers that this passage is now fulfilled in their hearing? He means to tell them that he is the one who is filled with the Spirit, that he is the anointed one, that he is the one sent to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal broken hearts, to free prisoners. In other words, Jesus recognizes himself in this passage.

We can interpret that self-recognition in two ways. One way is rather far-fetched. Jesus reads the passage and, bingo, the penny drops and he says to himself for the first time: "Yes, that is what I want to be. Yes, that is what God wants me to be." The other way

may be more plausible. Jesus already knows what he is going to be and do, and when he reads this passage, his already present self-understanding is confirmed and he now announces it for the first time to others: “This day this passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” In both cases the result is the same: Jesus presents himself for the first time to the public as the kind of leader, as the kind of messiah described by Isaiah 61, a leader or messiah who is not a general or warrior but one who comes to help the poor and downtrodden. This is his self-image.

We Catholics have not been known as great readers of the bible in the past. The usual way of thinking is that Protestants read the bible and the Catholics have the Eucharist. But since Vatican II that has changed. We are reading the bible more and more, and many main-line Protestant churches have become more liturgical and Eucharistic in their practices. But despite the lack of emphasis on the bible in our church in the past we are still on base in our understanding of Jesus. We knew and know that he was not a warrior king. We knew and know that he is the kind of messiah or leader described in this passage from Isaiah, one concerned with the poor and downtrodden. We knew and know that even though we might not have known that Jesus found this understanding of himself in Isaiah and proclaimed it as his own in the Gospels.

But if Jesus understood himself in this way and we are called to imitate him (“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...,” we read in ch. 2 of Paul’s Letter to the Philippians), then we must be like him. We must take the words of Isaiah 61 and make them our way of understanding ourselves and our lives. We must heal the brokenhearted, we must free those deprived of their freedom, we must bring good news to the poor.

Today’s readings tell us other things as well, and I suppose we must say that since they are part of Sacred Scripture they too are trying to form the mind of Christ in us. For example, in today’s second reading from Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians, we are told that we should rejoice always, that we are to pray without ceasing, that we are to give thanks in all circumstances, that we are to test everything, retain what is good, and refrain from every kind of evil. Those last commands--that we are to test everything, retain what is good and refrain from every kind of evil—seem sensible enough. But can we rejoice always? Can we pray without ceasing? Can we give thanks in all circumstances? Can we say those things to someone today who is jobless and will soon be

homeless? Can we say that to parents who are wondering how they are going to feed their children? Rejoice, pray, give thanks? There is nothing to rejoice about. There is much to pray about, but by way of pleading for a change in life. There is nothing for which to give thanks. How, in other words, do these scriptural commands apply to those living in the midst of a depression?

They can and must apply to them. We must say these things to ourselves and others, no matter how bad the situation may be. There is always something about which we can rejoice. So we could concentrate on these things in order to balance the bad things. We can always pray. Indeed, we should pray all the more when things are bad. And there is always something for which to give thanks. Again, we should concentrate on these things to balance the bad things. In the end all will be well, because God exists and loves us and give us His son to be our leader and guide on each step of our journey. In one word, our faith in God's love for us, in Jesus' love for us, will see us through everything. Rejoice always, again, I say rejoice. May the God of peace preserve us entirely, spirit, soul and body. The one who calls us is faithful, and He will accomplish all this in our lives. He, our messiah, is here precisely for us, the poor, the downtrodden That is the Good News, and it is for us. Amen.