

Luke 4:14-30. Charity Begins at Home?

Introduction

Do you want to know God? If so, how would you describe this desire? Is it a fond wish, something you think would be nice but it doesn't really matter if it doesn't happen. As we consider Luke 4:14-30 we need to come to terms with the fact that the gospel is not for people who are merely open to listen to talk about God. No! The gospel is for desperate people; for those who are desperate to experience God's grace and mercy. Is that you? Is that me?

In Luke 4 the Great Event is described for us: the coming of Jesus, the Prophet of Grace, to Nazareth. The reputation of Jesus had preceded him. The Nazarenes were present in the synagogue when the great event took place. They were impressed by what they saw and heard. But, tragically, they missed the main action. They were incapable of understanding the significance of what Jesus told them about himself.

Many years ago, I went to a Rugby Union match at Lancaster Park in Christchurch to watch the All Blacks playing the British Lions. I was seated immediately behind the goal posts at one end of the ground. The atmosphere was electric. At that time the British Lions had a very good team and some great players. It was a very exciting game. And I was right there, drinking it all in and thoroughly enjoying the experience.

In the second half the high point of the game occurred. A sensational try was scored which was the talk of the town for some time afterward. I was there at the ground when it happened. But I never saw it. Because as the All Black winger made his famous dash to the try line all the people in front of me stood up and completely blocked my view. I was physically present for the great event and yet missed it completely.

Luke 4:14-30

Let's read together Luke 4:14-30. As we read this passage please notice four key aspects: (1) The Great Event; (2) Being there for the Great Event; (3) Missing the Action; (4) The Case Study.

Let us begin our consideration of this passage by thinking of *the Great Event* it describes. What is the Great Event? It is this: *Jesus, the Prophet of Grace, Comes to Nazareth*. As verses 14-15 inform us, Jesus' fame had spread like a bush-fire. There was a buzz of excitement to be heard all over the province of *Galilee*. And now Jesus had come to the very town where he had been brought up as a child, to *Nazareth*.

Jesus went into the synagogue, as was his custom, and read these telling words from Isaiah 61:1-2: "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*" (vv18-19)

First, do note Luke's great stress on Jesus as *the Prophet of God*. Jesus is God's mouthpiece, God's specially appointed spokesman. In verse 15 Luke summarises Jesus' ministry all over Galilee. We know from verse 23 that Jesus had performed many mighty miracles in towns like Capernaum. However, for Luke what we need to know is that Jesus "*taught* in their synagogues." Further, when Jesus introduces

himself to the people of his home town, Nazareth, he introduces himself as the one who has been anointed by God's Spirit to speak for God. He is anointed to *preach* the good news (v18). He is the one sent to *proclaim* freedom and to proclaim recovery of sight and to release the oppressed through his ministry of proclamation (v18). He has been sent to *proclaim* the Age of Grace (v19).

But Jesus is not only the Prophet of God. He is also *the Prophet to the Poor*. Verse 18 is quite clear on this. Jesus is anointed by the Spirit of God "to preach the gospel *to the poor*." Indeed, one of the major themes of Luke's Gospel is the ministry of Jesus to the poor. However, many Christians read these verses in a sloppy manner. They think that Jesus is saying, "I have not been sent to the wealthy, upper classes of society, but to the impoverished and those who lack this world's resources." This raises a very important question. In this passage who are "*the poor*"? Well, in the first instance, observe that verses 18-19 provide further descriptions of "the poor." They are "*the prisoners*", "*the blind*", and "*the oppressed*."

Jesus is quoting from Isaiah 61:1-2. All of these descriptions - "*the poor*", "*the prisoners*", "*the blind*", and "*the oppressed*" - are used and developed in the chapters which precede Isaiah 61. In Isaiah the poor are not a certain class of Jew who are denied this world's resources. No, *the entire Jewish nation is "the poor."* For the whole of Israel is now in captivity in Babylon. As such, all Jews, even those who scored well-paying jobs in Babylon, are "the poor", "the prisoners", those who are "blind" to God's plan, "the oppressed." In Luke's Gospel, "the poor" includes not only blind beggars who have coins dropped in their begging bowls, but also very wealthy people like Zacchaeus who climbed a tree in his desperation to see Jesus. Indeed in Luke's Gospel, "the poor" is another way of referring to "the desperate".

We should remember, of course, that Jesus told a number of parables against the rich and commented, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Lk 18:24). So we do not expect to find a high percentage of rich people among "the poor" of Luke's Gospel. However, when Jesus, following Isaiah 61:1, says he has been sent to preach the gospel to the poor he means that the gospel is for desperate people. So this includes the wealthy tax collector who stands in the Temple because he was a desperate man who beat his breast and cried out for mercy. The gospel is for the disciples of Jesus who desperately long for one of the days of the Son of Man. The gospel of salvation is for those who express their faith by crying out day and night for justice. Jesus is the *Prophet to the Poor*, the Prophet of the Desperate.

Jesus, then, is the Prophet of God and the Prophet to the Poor. We might also add that he is the Prophet of Salvation and the Prophet of the End-Time. But there is one other aspect to Jesus' prophethood we must not miss. Jesus is *the Prophet of Grace*. This is of enormous importance and this is indicated by the words which form the climax of Jesus' reading from Isaiah: "to proclaim the year of *the Lord's favour*."

I was present when that great try was scored at Lancaster Park. The Nazarenes were there when the most significant moment of Jesus' visit occurred. The people of Nazareth *heard Jesus introducing himself to them as the Prophet of Grace*. "Today," he said, "This Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." In other words, Jesus said, "I am the Great Prophet of Grace spoken about in Isaiah 61." And the Nazarenes were impressed by Jesus. As we read in verse 22: "*All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.*" There is

tremendous irony in this passage. The Nazarenes recognised that Jesus' words were words of grace. But they failed to understand Jesus as the Prophet of Grace. Indeed, they ended up *rejecting the Prophet of Grace*. Consider their question: "*Isn't this Joseph's son?*" (v22). Rather than seeing Jesus as a prophet sent by God they see him as someone who is first and foremost a Nazarene and who, therefore, has a special responsibility to care for the people of his own community. Jesus knows this is the reason for their question and therefore, he says, "*I tell you the truth...no prophet is accepted in his hometown*" (v24). The Nazarenes are not prepared to accept Jesus as the Prophet of Grace.

The Nazarenes think only of themselves. They think of what Jesus, with his great power, can do for them and their community. They *miss the action* because they fail to see the breadth and length and height and depth of what God is doing in and through Jesus. They have tunnel vision. They fail to see Jesus as the Prophet of Grace.

A six-part documentary on Modern Art was once shown on ABC TV. One episode concerned those modern artists who are not out to shock and disgust but to portray beauty. The British artist, Gary Hume was interviewed. Standing in front of his own paintings he commented on how annoying it was for him when people did not deeply respond to his art but merely mouthed platitudes such as "*Isn't that nice?*" Hume believes his art is great art and that people viewing it should be profoundly moved by its beauty. You can have a beautifully designed swimming pool with deliciously cool water on a sweltering day. Yet some people are content to sit on the side of the pool and dangle their feet in the water. They say, "*What a nice pool.*" But they've missed out on the experience that comes with jumping into the pool and feeling that cool, refreshing water lap around them. In a similar way I have heard many people say after a church service, "*That was a nice sermon.*" Yet often those same people did not really understand the central point that was being made by the speaker. It just ended up sounding nice.

For the Nazarenes the issue boiled down to this: who is this Jesus who preaches such nice sermons? Is he first and foremost *Jesus the Nazarene*, "*Joseph's son*"? Or, is he Jesus *the Prophet*, the special mouthpiece of God, sent by God in his grace to people desperate to know him and find salvation? Jesus says to the Nazarenes, "*Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Doctor, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum'*" (v23). In other words, a doctor should heal the people who are sick in his own household. He should attend first and foremost to the people of his own circle of family and friends. In Jesus' day the proverb which expressed this was "*Doctor, heal yourself!*" Our own modern proverb which expresses the same sentiment is: "*Charity begins at home!*" The Nazarenes think that since Jesus performed great miracles in Capernaum he should certainly do just as much in his own hometown, for his own community. After all, Jesus is a Nazarene himself. He has a responsibility, an *obligation* to meet the needs of the people of Nazareth.

Many Christians have the same attitude. Many years ago, when I was heading off to Pakistan with my family, Christians would say to me, "*Why are you going? There is so much to do here. Surely, charity begins at home!*" Now, back in Sydney, I strike the same attitude with respect to cross-cultural ministry. As part of my ministry, I try to challenge Christians to get serious about ministering to people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds who are increasingly all around us in multiethnic Sydney. But the Nazarene mentality is alive and well in our churches. Church members often think first and foremost about their own church community. They

want their leaders to give priority to ministering to people like themselves. They do not see their leaders as God's servants sent to be the instruments of God's grace to all desperate people, regardless of ethnic or cultural background. They see their leaders as having an obligation, a responsibility to do what they think is necessary. They think in terms of "Doctor, heal yourself!" They think in terms of "Charity begins at home!" If our churches are to be effective in cross-cultural ministry we must distance ourselves from Nazareth.

The Nazarenes were there for the great event. But they missed the action. They didn't listen to Jesus properly. They saw Jesus as a fellow Nazarene, a person obliged to use his power for their good and well-being. They treated him like a genie in a bottle. They wanted his power to be especially available to them. They failed to see him as God's prophet sent by God *in grace* to desperate people.

In Luke 4, then, Luke (1) describes the Great Event which took place in Nazareth. (2) He describes a people, who initially, were thrilled and impressed to be there. But (3) he describes a people who tragically missed the action and failed to appreciate the true significance of who Jesus is. Jesus concludes his rebuke of the Nazarenes with (4) a *case study* from the time of Elijah and Elisha.

Remember, Jesus is anointed by God's Spirit to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, to preach the Gospel of Grace. Jesus does not come to Nazareth as one who will dance to the tune that they play. Using Elijah and Elisha as examples, Jesus reminds them that a prophet is someone sent by God to those whom God chooses to save and bless. Elijah and Elisha did not even have an obligation to minister to the widows and lepers of Israel, of whom there were many. Rather, God sent his prophets to benefit the lives of non-Jewish people, Gentiles such as the widow of Sidon and Naaman the Syrian - desperate people presented by Jesus as examples of "the poor" and do note Naaman was a wealthy, high status military commander. Jesus' case study focuses on *objects of grace*. He greatly offends and angers the people of Nazareth when he refers to *Gentiles* as the objects of God's grace.

Jesus' case study clearly implies that God in grace does not restrict his attentions to the Jewish people. He is free to minister to desperate people regardless of whether they be Jews or Gentiles. In his Gospel, Luke has already made it clear that Jesus is the one who brings salvation to all people - to Gentiles as well as Jews. So, when old Simeon held the infant Jesus in his arms, he declared, "*For my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel*" (2:30-32).

Therefore, to understand Jesus as the Prophet of Grace is to see him as the one who comes to proclaim the Gospel to all who are desperate to know God and experience his grace, regardless of their ethnic or cultural background. If we share the heart of Jesus, if we are gripped by the reality of God's grace, if we have stripped off the Charity Begins At Home mentality, then we will be committed to cross-cultural ministry. We will recognise that among all peoples, irrespective of ethnic and cultural background, there are those who, by the working of God's Spirit, are desperate to know God and his salvation. We will follow in the Master's footsteps as we seek to reach them or to assist other churches as they seek to do this.