

Epiphany 3, Year C
Luke 4:14-21
January 24, 2010

Today's gospel lesson is the calm before the storm. Next week these same people who are now paying rapt attention to Jesus' every word will try to kill him, and fail only because of some sort of mystical event that enables him to "pass through the midst of them" and go on his way. Just now however "all the eyes in the synagogue are upon him" as he tells them "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The transformation from enthusiastic admirers to murderous mob happens because Jesus offers an interpretation of the Isaiah passage very much at odds with what his audience wanted. That interpretation, and the response it engendered, is the real point of the story. But right now we aren't there yet, and so this morning I am trying to confine my attention to what is only the first half of an important episode in Luke's gospel. So let us consider first what this passage from Isaiah that Jesus cites is all about, then consider what it means to decree its fulfillment, and finally – most important I hope – what it might mean to us.

The passage from Isaiah is of the proclamation of a Jubilee Year. They were said to have been ordered every fiftieth year, but so sweeping in scope were they that no one knows for sure whether they ever actually happened or not, and most scholars think perhaps not. Nevertheless Leviticus 25:10ff describes one in

some detail. Only the King may proclaim one, and during the Jubilee year all debts are forgiven, and all property previously alienated is restored to its original owners. In addition to this there is to be neither sowing nor reaping; the people are to live entirely off what the land provides of itself in that year.

What we have therefore is the proclamation of a “Super Sabbath,” a time of forgiveness and rest for all the people and the land itself. Everyone, everything, takes a break and enjoys the natural bounty of the Lord. This of course cuts both ways. Poor people with lots of debts would welcome such a moment; it meant freedom from the oppressive power of too many debts with too few resources to fund them. On the other hand without the resources to store food in larders poor people might well wonder how to feed themselves for a year on what would amount to field gleanings. Wealthy people would be considerably less enthusiastic about having to forgive the debts owed them, but perhaps, if their larders were full much more sanguine about what to eat. What is required therefore to enter into the fullness of Jubilee is both forgiveness and trust. Forgiveness of all debts previously incurred – which in some cases would have been considerable - and trust that there would still be food for the table. Moreover, to prevent hardship for some there would have to be widespread cooperation among the many.

To enter into the fullness of Jubilee therefore requires people to live together in unusual ways. It requires people to forgive each other what they are truly and properly owed, and it requires people to take responsibility for the

physical welfare of others whether they are part of your own family and clan or not. And this, says that passage that Jesus quoted from Isaiah, is what “the year of the Lord’s favor” brings, that kind of living together, that kind of shared experience of life. For Jesus to declare that this passage has been fulfilled therefore means two things. First it means that he is asserting an authority that only kings have, the authority to speak with the voice of God in proclaiming that moment of “the Lord’s favor,” that Jubilee. Second, it means that he is declaring that very moment, that time of forgiveness, trust and cooperation across social and economic lines, has arrived.

Now we don’t really know how Jesus understood himself, but this passage makes very clear how Luke understood Jesus. What Luke obviously saw was that in Jesus the “Year of the Lord’s favor,” the moment of forgiveness, trust, cooperation across all lines of human life and society was breaking into this world. The challenge for us that this passage offers, a challenge made more dramatic by its conclusion that we will hear next week, is whether or not we truly believe and embrace what Luke proclaims has happened in Christ. Can you truly believe that the moment of forgiveness has arrived? Can you truly embrace not just as a concept, but as a lived experience, forgiving people the debts they actually and truly owe you? And I don’t just mean financial debts here; we live in a society in which significant financial debts are for the most part out of our hands, since most people do what Beth and I did, which is to borrow money from a bank, not a person, to buy houses, cars and the like.

What I mean is can you look at the people across from you, look at the people who really have perhaps wronged you in some way, and say to yourself “now is the year of the Lord’s favor. This moment, right now, I forgive, I commit myself to reconciliation, and I therefore give up on the emotional debt that is owed me and will never again try to collect on it.” Can you look at the people across from you, whether that be across the street or across the pew, and know in your heart that you are part of them and they of you, and that you are called to work for and trust in one another in a genuinely cooperative effort to create a life of compassion for one another, regardless of whatever has happened in your shared past? Can you offer freely your own resources, whatever they may be, based not upon any calculations of what might be a “fair share” or who might also contribute, but based entirely upon your own sense of involvement in and concern for the community of which you are a part? For this is what “the year of the Lord’s favor” calls for, this is what such a moment looks like.

And we have all witnessed such moments in one way or another, though in miniature, through glimpse and intimation, rather than in the fullness of what they truly call forth from us, and quite often we see it in response to catastrophe. In Haiti right now, hundreds of thousands of people are donating millions of dollars in the effort to get food, water, doctors and medicines to Port Au Prince, and the government of Canada has moved to cancel all the debt that the Haitian government owes the Canadian. It is my fervent hope that our Congress will do the same thing with any debts the Haitian government owes us. This has

nothing to do with what is fair, it has nothing to do with whether or not debts legally incurred should be paid. Because of course they should. It has instead to do with another kind of moral calculus altogether, the calculus of Jubilee, the calculus of forgiveness, trust and cooperation among people.

But within the context of that Jubilee calculus we must also note that it is not a free ride, an excuse to behave irresponsibly because no one will hold anyone accountable. The demands of the Jubilee are far greater than the demands of legal contracts legally entered. The demand of the Jubilee, of the “year of the Lord’s favor” is that people forgive, and having forgiven work together for the common welfare of the whole community. The demand of Jubilee is not satisfied simply by letting people go, for having been freed Jubilee calls each of us back into the bonds of a mutual trust and interdependence most of us are not used to exercising. Both that letting go and that joining in is hard for people to enter into in the unreserved spirit of “the year of the Lord’s favor.” We do it when we absolutely have to, when the moment of crisis forces our hands, but mostly not at other times.

Yet, as a vision of what might be it is compelling. For we have just come through what might be called an “anti-Jubilee” a moment when acquisitiveness on the part of the general population was fed to overflowing by a financial industry whose stockholders were only too glad to see more and more profits, with the result that the housing market collapsed, nearly sending our whole economy into a catastrophic depression. We are riddled with debt that can’t be

forgiven, only foreclosed on, and the profits of more than a decade have thus been wiped out. I see no point in blaming anyone for this, since all of us conspired together to create the moment in which we now live. But the situation we are now in provides a marked contrast to the vision of forgiveness, trust and interdependence that is characteristic of Jubilee. I am not suggesting we can switch the one system for the other; we can't, we won't, but Jubilee stands as a compelling critique of the path this world has taken. As such it remains for us a guide, an image of the world we are called by God to seek to create. Though we won't ever fully succeed, the glimpses we get of that "year of the lord's favor" are, we may all fervently hope, enough to lead us on.