

“Reading Out Loud”

Luke 4: 14-21

Epiphany 3C, Boise, 2022

Both our OT and Gospel readings today are about men who are reading, first Ezra the priest and scribe and then our Lord himself.

The Jews who returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the Temple and walls had reached a critical juncture. Were they going to lapse back into idolatry and blend into the society of the peoples surrounding them, which was what caused their exile in the first place, or would they reestablish the Law of Moses in their practice and remain faithful to Yahweh? Ezra was to make certain there would not be a repeat of what happened before. He set the course of Judaism in the period of the Second Temple by giving the people a full reading of the Torah before the Water Gate. There were no printed books in the 5th century, B.C., and reading and writing were specialized activities performed by scribes. So, of course, if the Jews were to learn what was in the Law, they must have it read to them. And they would continue their readings of the Torah, along with those of the Prophets, one passage at a time, on Sabbaths in the synagogue thereafter. The rabbi or elder might give a sermon to explain the reading, just as Ezra’s ministers did that day the city was assembled before the Water Gate.

In the account St Luke gives us in the Gospel, Jesus himself is a reader. On a visit to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, the attendant hands him the Isaiah scroll. He unfurls it and reads the prophecy in chapter 61.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because he has anointed me to proclaim the gospel to the poor.

Then, according to Luke, the most remarkable sermon followed, one that no preacher since has been able to match. Jesus gives back the scroll to the attendant and sits down, indicating his authority as a teacher. And he says, “Today,” as you are listening to me read the Scripture, it is fulfilled.” Yes, I am

the one who has received the Spirit's anointing — which was the subject of our Gospel the Sunday before last.

Nothing so spectacular has occurred during the thousands of times I have heard the Scriptures read in church. Yet we consider the exercise important, and so continue to do it. We'll get back to that day in Nazareth when the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled by the Messiah's reading it. But let us reflect a bit on our continuing the tradition of the synagogue of reading substantial passages of Scripture when we assemble. It is one of the practices that now distinguishes liturgical churches from the non-liturgical. Most evangelical congregations no longer have a stand-alone reading from the Bible. The pastors do all the quoting in their sermons. The assumption seems to be that, unless a passage or verse is fully explained, it should be left to a Bible study. Now that we have cheap printed Bibles with study notes, is there anything worthwhile in the mere reading of a passage out loud? That is a question I ask my Inquirers' Class in the section on worship.

I begin my answer with a simple observation that before the modern era of mass literacy nearly everything that was written was intended to be spoken by a reader to an audience. Such was the only way that one of Jeremiah's prophecies or St Paul's letters could be made known to any but a scribe, a professional penman and reader. The Bible is ancient literature and hence everything in it was written in a way that was meant to be spoken. Not all translations today capture this quality of orality that makes the text come alive when read out loud, but we must try our best to convey the full meaning of God's word. We should consider every public reading to be an event, an occasion when God uses the voice of the reader to speak his Word to the congregation here assembled, to put it into our hearts and minds in a way that will penetrate and not return to him empty. The Bible can of course have this effect when we meditate on it alone, but when it is read publicly the intended effect is that the whole congregation bear

fruit.

When you heard St Paul read this morning, you heard him the same way the Corinthians heard the letter the first time. He was hundreds of miles away in a different city, but the reader stood in for him, and everyone in the assembly heard the apostle preach to him or her. Even if I make no comment at all on the passage in my sermon, you nonetheless heard apostolic words spoken.

And when it is time for the Gospel, we then have a reading that is integral to our worship: hence, the Liturgy of the Word, the Word as used in the worship we offer to God. As with other acts of praise, we have you do it standing up. When we hear the wonderful words and deeds of our Saviour issue forth from the deacon's mouth, we in loving memory give thanks for them: "Praise be to you, Lord Christ."

Why is anything written down in the first place? So that it can be repeated and will not be forgotten. So that we will remember. Most of our worship takes the form of thanksgiving, and thanksgiving depends on memory. We can be grateful for only what we remember, and taking the trouble to remember is itself an act of gratitude. We should do more of that in our social relations, but in religion it is essential. The Eucharist, a word that in Greek means "thanksgiving," is a memorial — a memorial of Christ's Sacrifice for our salvation. It is not merely a memorial, but as an act of worship before the consecrated elements are distributed, it is certainly a memorial — "of his blessed passion and precious death, his mighty resurrection and glorious ascension" — one that we offer nearly every Sunday.

But before we get to the Eucharist, our reading of the Gospel is also a memorial. We didn't read about the Messiah's reading Isaiah in the synagogue just for information. We read to give thanks that, 2000 years ago, that moment arrived when the Lord's Anointed fulfilled the prophecy — fulfilled the promise — of the gospel's being preached to the poor, of the release of the captives, of the "recovering of sight to the blind," of the beginning of the Jubilee when all would be

restored. “Thanks be to God” should be our response — not “Oh, that’s very interesting.” Let us give thanks for our Lord’s many words and deeds in the Gospels, week by week, even as we repeat the remembrance of the culminating event, the Sacrifice he made for our redemption.

The season we are now in is Epiphanytide, the season of manifestations. The reading of the Gospel is the epiphany we have every Sunday of the year; for in it Christ is revealed, and God through Christ. A picture is drawn by St Luke’s description. Jesus has of late begun his ministry in Galilee after emerging from the desert. Now anointed with the Spirit, he returns to the village where he had spent the first thirty years of his life. The people there know him. He is asked to read the Scripture in the synagogue on the Sabbath, “as was his custom,” the Evangelist adds. Jesus takes the scroll, stands before the congregation, and reads. Can you see him now? The words he will now read were written for him centuries earlier, and now it is time for the Messiah, the King, to make them his proclamation, to announce his Reign: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” and the time of mankind’s liberation has arrived. Satan will no longer hold you captive.

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

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