

Dear friends, greetings from cold and snowy Michigan.

I write this article having just come in from 2 hours snow-blowing to clear the way along the drive to the road. The temps were about -10F, with wind-chill approx. -25F, so I was well wrapped up in multiple layers, 2 sets of gloves, a balaclava to give me all-face protection, 2 caps and mere slits for my eyes to look through. I started off with goggles, but these frosted up on the inside. For those who are reading this in warmer climes, please count your blessings that you are not forced to expend such energies on shifting snow. I came in and peeled off my soaking layers and blowing like a beached whale. There is no workout quite like moving snow and pushing a recalcitrant and reluctant snow-blower up and down inclines in deep snow! Nice though snow is, and necessary though it be for fertilizing the ground and restocking the water aquifers, when it comes to snow I am a firm believer in the "Not in my back-yard" syndrome. The drifts were about 2 feet deep, and the snow-plough had kindly dumped a wall of snow almost 3 feet thick across my driveway.

Maybe snow is a metaphor for sin, i.e. each snow-flake seems like something of great attraction and beauty and so light as to be considered of no consequence, but the cumulative impact of many snow-flakes is nothing less than a dead weight. Whenever I see a blanket of fresh snow, I remember the garment of righteousness which God covers us with when we repent of our sins and turn to Him in faith. However, whenever I have to move snow, then it is snow's close correlation with sin that comes much more to the mind.

But this afternoon I will be writing about something else....dashed expectations....as found in Luke 4.16-31.

This is the most detailed account of the inauguration of Jesus' public ministry. After the story of Jesus as a boy in the temple, Luke provides no further information about what Jesus was doing from the ages of 12-30. In all likelihood, He was at home in Nazareth employed as a carpenter / builder and joining in the nightly discussions of the law and Torah. Around the time of His birth, a lay-movement sprang up called the *haverim* (meaning "friends"). In any given village, serious minded Jews would gather in the evening after their labors and devote themselves to the study and application of the Torah. It seems likely that Jesus would have participated in such discussions, because in His debates with the religious leaders He demonstrated finely honed rabbinic argument strategies.

After His baptism and temptation in the wilderness, Jesus returned to Galilee to begin a popular public ministry (Luke 4.14-15). Apparently part of that ministry was a number of unrecorded works of healing in Capernaum. Then, Jesus returned abruptly to Nazareth and attended Sabbath worship in the local synagogue. It was customary in those days for synagogue leaders to invite a worthy person to read from the Scriptures and comment on the reading. In Antioch of Pisidia, Luke records a similar scenario when Paul and Barnabas were invited to offer a word of exhortation to the people (Acts 13.15) in just a setting. Luke states simply that Jesus "stood up to read" yet it appears that some things had been arranged. The book of Isaiah was given to Jesus, who then read a selected passage. This led to an interchange with the congregation after which Jesus invoked 2 heroes of faith from the OT to support His conclusions. The scene closes with the foiled attempt to kill Him.

We normally read the initial reaction of the congregation as positive. Luke 4.22 (KJV) reads, "And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth. And they said, Is not this Joseph's son?"

This is translated in the NIV as "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked" and the NRSV translated this verse as "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"

Put simply, these translations suggest that the congregation liked what they heard. But this doesn't explain why a few moments later they were trying to kill him. The phrase *emartyroun auto* may be translated here literally as "they witnessed him." But did they witness for Him or against Him? The Greek does not have the actual prepositions "for" or "against" in the text, but *auto* ("to him" or "for him") is in the dative case, which can be translated as a dative of advantage (i.e. all spoke well of Him) or equally validly as a dative of disadvantage, (i.e. all spoke against Him).

Reactions to sermons can be positive or negative, and in this case the crowd ultimately wanted to kill their preacher (more extreme than most modern-day preachers experience)...so what could have annoyed them so much?

There is no mention of Nazareth in the OT. The settlement of the town is believed to have taken place in the 2nd century BC. During that period, Aristobulus the Maccabean conquered Galilee and Judaized it. Nazareth is known to have remained a Jewish town until the 4th century AD. Furthermore, archaeological records indicate that one of the 24 courses of priests from the temple settled there as refugees after the destruction of the temple in 70AD. Nazareth had to have been a conservative Jewish town for this to have happened. Nazareth was essentially a settler town, for Galilee was not just Galilee, but it was "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Isaiah 9.1, Matthew 4.15). In the 2nd century BC, Maccabean nationalism tried to create and change the "facts on the ground" and the plan of action was to conquer the area of Galilee and move Jewish settlers from Judea into Galilee. Historically speaking, colonial enclaves or settlements tend to be strongly nationalistic, with a strong religious, political and cultural self-identity. Nazareth seems was no exception.

So, what annoyed the congregation so much (remembering as an aside that the collective noun for a group of crocodiles is a congregation!)? Isaiah 61 reads as follows:

"The Spirit of the Lord GOD *is* upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives,

And the opening of the prison to those who are bound;

² To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God;

To comfort all who mourn,

³ To console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness,

The planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified."

⁴ And they shall rebuild the old ruins, they shall raise up the former desolations,

And they shall repair the ruined cities, the desolations of many generations.

⁵ Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, and the sons of the foreigner shall be your plowmen and your vinedressers.

⁶ But you shall be named the priests of the LORD, they shall call you the servants of our God.

You shall eat the riches of the Gentiles, and in their glory you shall boast.

⁷ Instead of your shame you shall have double honor, and instead of confusion they shall rejoice in their portion. Therefore in their land they shall possess double; everlasting joy shall be theirs.

⁸ "For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery for burnt offering; I will direct their work in truth, And will make with them an everlasting covenant.

⁹ Their descendants shall be known among the Gentiles, and their offspring among the people.

All who see them shall acknowledge them, that they are the posterity whom the LORD has blessed."

¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God;

For He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness,

As a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its bud, as the garden causes the things that are sown in it to spring forth,

So the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations.”

This is the text of Isaiah 61. But, what did Jesus actually say? He quotes from verses 1-2 as follows:

The Spirit of the Lord GOD *is* upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; ~~He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,~~ to proclaim liberty to the captives,
And the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
² To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, ~~and the day of vengeance of our God;~~
~~To comfort all who mourn,~~

Jesus omits the phrase “He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted” but borrows a sentence from Isaiah 58.6 and add this instead. Perhaps the cause of offence was what happened when Jesus read “to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD” and promptly stopped the reading, refusing to talk about God’s vengeance.

Verses 5-6 of Isaiah 61 assured comfort and gladness for the mourners. Leaving that material out would have caused some disappointment. However, verses 7-11 were missed also, and this struck at the heart of Jewish nationalism and their settler self-identity. V. 7 speaks of repairing ruined cities, and these verses speak of the Jews having a “double portion” in the land. The call to build and to plant was a part of the call of Jeremiah (Jer. 1.10), and these two concepts explain why a town like Nazareth had been founded by Jewish settlers in the midst of “Galilee of the Gentiles.” Their goal was to raise up the former devastations and in their land they intended to possess a double portion.

But the missing verses 8-10 are even more critical. These included promises that the Gentiles around them would be their servants, and that the wealth of these aliens and foreigners would flow to the Jewish settlers. With cheap foreign labor available they would be able to devote themselves to being “priests of the LORD” (verse 9). It is easy to imagine the strong attraction such a text would have to a settler community. Isaiah 61 was therefore at the heart of their self-identity and self-understanding. Here in Isaiah the anticipated golden age of the Messiah promised great things. With the coming of the anointed one of God, all the hard work would be done by the surrounding Gentiles, who would serve the Jews of settler towns like Nazareth, and they, the settlers, would become wealthy on the labor of others. This vision of the Messianic age would have been immensely attractive to the inhabitants of Nazareth.

When we look at the Targums, we see this conclusion verified. The Targums were Aramaic paraphrases of the Hebrew OT which were prepared and read in synagogues after the reading of the Hebrew OT to give the sense of the text to the Aramaic speaking Jews of the 1st century AD. The Targum of Isaiah 61.6-7 reads as follows, “You shall eat the possessions of the Gentiles, and in their glory you shall be indulged. Instead of your being ashamed and confounded, two for one the benefits I promise you I will bring to you, and the Gentiles will be ashamed who were boasting of their lot.” Clearly, the Aramaic paraphrases, read in the synagogues, could only have excited nationalistic fervor in the anticipated Messianic age.

And so we return to Luke 4. Jesus, a local boy, comes to town as an itinerant rabbi and begins to read a passage dearly beloved by his congregation – Isaiah 61. But, to their shock, He stopped reading in verse 2 just before the phrase “...and the day of vengeance of our God.” He stopped reading before the passage speaks of judgment and servitude being visited on the neighboring Gentiles, whom they, as a Jewish settler community, were there to displace, turning Galilee of the Gentiles into an idyllic Galilee of the Jews. In His opening phrase, “The Spirit of the LORD is upon me...” Jesus referred back to His baptism, and announced Himself as the anointed one promised in the text, i.e. the promised and long-anticipated Messiah. His audience had a simple choice: accept Jesus of Nazareth as the anticipated and promised Messiah, together with His inspired interpretation of Isaiah 61, or reject Him as a deluded upstart and hope for another more acceptable Messiah.

In His reading of Isaiah 61, with the interpolation from Isaiah 58.6, Jesus has turned a text of Jewish glory and triumph over the Gentiles into a text of mercy to the downtrodden and good news to the pious poor who are seeking God. His interpretation dashed their hopes of material gain and dominance over the neighboring Gentiles and replaced this with a vision of Messianic justice for all people who suffer, who are forced from their homes, who yearn to return to the land of their birth, and who are seeking God. Jesus shifts the focus from “here is what you are going to receive in the Messianic age” to “here is what you are going to give in the Messianic age” as the Messianic age is characterized by Jesus as exhibiting proclamation of good news, justice advocacy for the displaced and disenfranchised, and compassion for the poor.

And so the audience in verse 22 was not happy. If this was indeed the Messiah, then His revelation of what the Messianic age would look like was far different from what they were hoping and dreaming. Jesus replied to their hostility in verse 23 with the proverb about the physician, again affirming in His self-identification as “prophet” that what He spoke was of God. He then poured oil on the proverbial flames through giving 2 inflammatory examples.

The first was of the widow of Zarephath. He affirmed that there were many widows in Israel at the time, but Elijah was sent to none of them, but to Zarephath of Sidon, to a Gentile woman who was a widow.

The second example was of Naaman. Again, He affirmed that there were many lepers in Israel at the time, but Elisha did not heal any of them except Naaman, the Syrian, i.e. a Gentile.

The ancient worldview re. territorial gods meant that the God of Israel would not be powerful in Zarephath, in modern-day southern Lebanon. For the widow to trust the God of Israel to have power to deliver her outside of His alleged territory was a huge leap of faith....a worldview shift. For Naaman to believe that the God of Israel could heal him in the muddy and shallow Jordan rather than in the gleaming and clear fresh waters of Damascus, fed year-round by the snow melt off Mt. Hermon, was also a leap of faith.

In giving these two examples, Jesus was in effect saying to his Jewish nationalist audience that if they wanted to receive the benefits of the newly-arrived age of the Messiah, they must abandon their nationalistic hopes and take upon themselves the faith of these 2 Gentiles. They were to see these 2 Gentiles as their spiritual superiors and acknowledge that these hated Gentiles could instruct them in the true nature of authentic faith. Jesus wanted models of genuine faith to illustrate the faith required in the Messianic era....and He reached beyond the community of which He was a part and invoked these 2 stories of Gentile heroes of faith.

In a sense, Jesus is affirming the essential need for cross-cultural witness. For the Gospel is in danger within any given culture of being overwhelmed by those forces which are dominant and which shape the given culture, e.g. radical individualism, the love of ease, the untrammled pursuit of personal happiness, nationalism, idolatry of greed, radical secularism or radical this, that or the other etc. In every culture, the Gospel is in constant danger of being compromised by the value system that supports the culture and its goals. A stranger to a given culture can more easily identify these points of cultural surrender and call the community of faith back to a purer faith. But such infusions of new life are often resented and resisted by those within the dominant culture. This is why our own community of faith is immeasurably enriched when we listen deeply to the concerns raised by immigrant brothers and sisters who can see more clearly than ourselves how the Gospel is being compromised within and by our own dominant host cultures.

In both the examples of Naaman and the widow of Zarephath, Jesus modeled the virtues of intellectual assent combined with obedience and trust. The widow grants that Yahweh has power in Baal’s territory

(intellectual assent). She then obeys the prophet's command to bake him a loaf, and she is willing to trust Yahweh for tomorrow. Naaman also travels from Syria to Israel, showing intellectual assent to the idea that Yahweh can help when the Syrian gods cannot. In his obedience to the command to bathe in the Jordan, he demonstrated trust in Yahweh. In giving the example of the widow of Zarephath first, Jesus also demonstrated that in the new community of the faithful in the Messianic era, men and women would share in this Kingdom as equals.

The congregation was incensed. Jesus had turned a text of nationalistic fervor and jingoism and ethnic pride and a self-justifying hatred of one's neighbor into a text of divine mercy for the poor, the outcast and the disenfranchised. If He was indeed the Messiah, they wanted nothing to do with Him.....so better to kill Him and wait for a Messiah who would bring them what they wanted and hoped for....a nationalist preacher of Isaiah 61.

History is replete with examples of one ethnic community displacing the other. To accomplish such a goal, normally the aggressor will feel the need to demean and dehumanize the community they are displacing, using words such as savages, terrorists, vermin, sub-humans etc. When a land-grab is in progress, woe to the brave individual who speaks up for the victims, especially when the aggressors are sure that God is on their side. In announcing His ministry, Jesus could have spoken words to please his hometown congregation. Words of encouragement in reclaiming the countryside from the neighboring Gentiles, emphasizing the importance of the Sabbath, maybe some guarded comments about the anticipated liberation from Roman rule and how the Messiah would bring relief from injustice for His Jewish hearers.

Rather, He stuns them with a bold and uncompromising vision of the Messianic era, an in-breaking Kingdom where justice, mercy and compassion are the dominant values, where national boundaries are to be broken down and in which we must all have the humility to learn from the previously demeaned Other what it means to model Kingdom living.

So, where does this leave us? Perhaps reflecting on our need to avoid having such a clear cut definition of God, or of end-time events that we are no longer open to the sovereign action of the Messiah today? Perhaps needing to listen more deeply to the concerns of brothers and sisters from other cultures who can point out those blind-spots in our own cultural expression of Kingdom-living? Perhaps replacing a sense of eschatological triumphalism at the destruction of the wicked with a sense of mercy, compassion and sacrifice for those who have yet to respond to the Gospel? These words of Jesus apply to us today as much as they did to the original Nazareth congregation.

It is my prayer that we will all hear afresh these words of Jesus and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal how we are to receive and apply them in our lives and ministries. It is my prayer that in upholding our own concept of the Messiah and His Kingdom that we don't follow in the example of the Nazareth congregation and seek to get rid of the real Messiah!

Have a blessed Sabbath,

Conrad.