

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
January 30, 2022
4th Sunday of Year C Luke 4:21-30

Sometimes what a person doesn't say is as important, maybe more important than what he or she does say. The reaction of the listener may be, "Did I miss something?" "What's this all about?" Or a sarcastic, "Excuse me, but you forgot something here." That is certainly the case with today's gospel. But first we have to step back a bit and return to last Sunday's gospel, which sets the stage for what we hear today. Jesus had been healing the sick in the neighboring town of Capernaum. He was attracting a great deal of attention. There was a "buzz" in the air about Jesus; people were no doubt wondering could this be the Messiah? We might say that Jesus had achieved "rock star" status. He is making His first public statement in His hometown synagogue. Naturally, people are interested in what He is going to say.

What Jesus does is read a passage from the prophet Isaiah, one with which His audience was very familiar. In the passage Isaiah speaks of all the wonderful things the Jewish people could expect when the Messiah finally arrives. Jesus announces, "Today this Scripture passage is being fulfilled in your hearing." It's happening right now, folks, not tomorrow, not years from now, but now. Their first reaction is "Wow, this is great news." They are especially happy because Jesus is a local, one of their own. They no doubt feel they have a special connection with Him.

Jesus knows what they are thinking and says, "Surely, you want me to do here the things that were done in Capernaum." There might even have been some resentment on their part that Capernaum had been the first beneficiary of Jesus' ministry. Capernaum, located by the Sea of Galilee, was not far from Nazareth, but it was a wealthier town than Nazareth. It had a profitable fishing business and the soil in that area was much better for farming. A major road passed through Capernaum, providing income to the town from the toll that travelling merchants would have to pay. By comparison Nazareth didn't count for very much. It was an impoverished hill-town whose main source of income was providing laborers for the nearby Graeco-Roman cities. You may remember in St. John's gospel that when the future apostle, Philip, tells his friend, Nathaniel, that he has met the One who might be the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, Nathaniel says, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" A sense of inferiority may have fueled the resentment of the Nazarethans, so that they thought, if Jesus did these wonderful things for those people, how much more will he do for us. They thought they had an "inside track."

At which point Jesus says, "Don't count on it folks." Jesus is aware of the reaction He will get. He says, "No prophet is accepted in his own native place." From our own American experience, we know that prophets like Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton may have been praised after their death, but in their lifetime they were killed, vilified or mocked. Why are prophets not accepted? Because prophets tell people not what they want to hear, but what they need to hear. Jesus is aware of His neighbors' resentment toward the people in Capernaum. Before they can receive the spiritual healing for their hardness of heart, a healing more necessary than any of the physical healings He can perform, He has to make them aware, He has to lance the boil, He has to cauterize the wound of their resentment.

Jesus goes on to remind them of two of the great prophets in their religious tradition, Elisha and Elijah, who, when they performed miracles, it was not for the benefit of their own people, the Jews, but for two pagans, two Gentiles, from nations that were often their enemies. What Jesus is saying is that in His ministry there will be no distinction between "insiders" and "outsiders," between "us" and "them," between "friend" and "foe." The people of Nazareth need to know that in God's sight all are equally valued. God's love is not reserved to privileged "insiders."

We see the crowd that at first was hanging on Jesus' every word now turn against Him. They realize why Jesus did not read the concluding line of the passage from Isaiah. The omission was quite deliberate on Jesus' part. That line spoke of the Messiah bringing "a day of vengeance from our God." Besides all the healings they had wanted Jesus to perform for them, there was something else they wanted, "a day of vengeance" against the Roman who had conquered their homeland, the Romans who had imposed so much suffering and hardship upon them. This was the kind of Messiah they wanted Jesus to be, someone who would make the Romans pay, and pay dearly. But Jesus refuses to play the role of an "avenging Messiah," because for the God Whom He would reveal as "Father," there is no vengeance, no violence, no division between "people like us" and "those people." To say that Jesus was a disappointment to them is putting it mildly. They are furious. They want to kill Him. They lead Him to the brow of a hill to throw Him off, but He escapes. A few years later He will again be led up a hill, the hill of Calvary, from which there will be no escape. There He reveals a God of limitless love, a love to be bestowed on whoever is willing to accept it, a love that excludes no one, a love that unites all humanity into one family.

In our own day we have seen to where resentments lead, prompting individuals to combine their anger with a belief in a "god who is on their side," to exact retribution on those they view as their enemies. In the tragic events of 9/11 terrorists, adherents to an extremist sect of Islam, seized upon their idea of an avenging deity to exact

what they in their twisted way saw as "justice." More recently, we have seen politicians exploiting the divisions within our nation to their own advantage, often invoking a partisan God to justify their pandering rhetoric.

It is only natural for us to want to associate with people with whom we share some affinity, identity or commonality. It is when those groups believe themselves to be superior to others, when they try to maintain some hold on privilege for themselves at the expense of others, that they run against the vision and message of Jesus enunciated in today's Gospel. As Christians, we are called to move beyond any exclusivity based upon religion, race, ethnicity, gender, age, class, politics or sexual orientation. In a few minutes we will sing a hymn, "O God of All the Nations," expressing precisely this sentiment. The melody is based upon Jean Sibelius's Finlandia.** It bespeaks a love of one's country, of patriotism, but a patriotism that is not chauvinistic or disparaging of other nations. It is a prayer that all the nations of our planet may flourish. Let us work to put an end to all those divisions that create envy, hostility and rivalry among people, that we can live as God's people, a people of peace, mercy and compassion, a people who do not look to violence in any form as a solution for society's problems.

**This is my prayer, O God of all the nations,
A prayer of peace for lands afar and mine.
This is my home, the country where my heart is;
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;
But other hearts in other lands are beating
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.

My country's skies are bluer than the ocean,
And sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine.
But other lands have sunlight too and clover,
And skies are everywhere as blue as mine.
So hear my prayer, O God of all the nations,
a prayer of peace for their land and for mine.