



Jesus' Mission Statement
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-21
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (January 23, 2022)

The American Red Cross announced on January 11 that because U.S. blood supplies are at extremely low levels the country is facing an unprecedented blood crisis. "If the nation's blood supply does not stabilize soon, life-saving blood may not be available for some patients when it is needed," warned in a joint statement with America's Blood Centers and the Association for the Advancement of Blood and Biotherapies. The Red Cross encourages those who can to donate, particularly those who are type O, the universal donor.

Many people find it scary or uncomfortable to give blood. In this week's gospel lesson, Jesus does something even more difficult: he goes back to his hometown, Nazareth, where he was nurtured physically, spiritually, and intellectually, to teach in the synagogue there. He quickly finds out that it's not easy to go back home, where everyone "knows" you and have expectations of you. In fact, the people listening to him probably watched him grow and play with their own children, saw him getting into the usual children's mischief, taught him to read, or watched him apprentice as a carpenter under his earthly father, Joseph.

I wonder how many of them were very close to his family and have noticed his strong character and confident demeanor. I wonder how many of them remembered the time when, during the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem at the beginning of his teenage years, he stayed behind in the Temple to discuss the Scriptures with the teachers of the Law. Perhaps some of them also new of the time, not too long ago when he, embarrassingly, went as a repentant sinner to his cousin John to be baptized at the river Jordan. Had the word spread that a voice from heaven declared him God's beloved Son as he was at prayer? Were they anticipating his rise into religious or even political leadership? Was he going to become a prophet?

We know how the event develops. Luke tells us that people are at first astonished with his pronouncement. But soon they get so enraged at his condemning words that they are ready to drive him, one of their hometown boys, to "the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff." (Lk 4:29)

But that segment of the story is not included in our gospel reading for today which stops at Jesus' announcement that Isaiah's prophetic words have come to completion. This fact allows us to consider Jesus' bold and fearless conviction without the distraction of people's reaction.

His firm resistance to the devil's temptations in the desert, the identity-affirming words of God spoken to him soon after his baptism, his training in the Scriptures as a pious Jew in his family and faith community, his witnessing of the social struggle of the poor and rejects by the hands of the most affluent in society and the abuses and violence inflicted on them by an occupying army must have shaped his love for Yahweh's anawim, the afflicted, with whom he associated.

Jesus takes Isaiah's words as a banner for his mission. Let's hear them again:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Jesus is not shy about interpreting Isaiah's words as speaking of him. He is anointed with the Spirit to bring good news to the poor and release to the captives, sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed. He is ushering in the year of God's favor. This is how he saw his calling and mission; this is what he gave his life to. Were his townfolks putting two and two together? His mother, Mary, certainly got a hint of this when the angel Gabriel spoke to her announcing the birth by her of the Son of the most High and name him Jesus, a name which means Savior. In her prophetic foresight, Elizabeth welcomed Mary as the mother of her Lord, a title reserved for God,¹ which prompted Mary to explode in her splendid song of praise, commonly known as the Magnificat:

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.” (Luke 1:46-48.52-53)

The gospel of Matthew reports the brutal assassination of innocent babies by the hands of Herod afraid to lose his grip on power when he heard of the king of the Jews newly born. The martyrdom of the innocents is preceded by the traumatic experience of running for dear life by Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, who sought refuge in Egypt to escape violence. I wonder: Would we have Jesus today were it not for those open borders?²

I must expect that those traumatic experiences have left an imprint on Jesus' character growing up. The recourse to violence by the powerful and the helplessness of vulnerable people is something that he has experienced firsthand at a very early age.

Rumors surrounding Jesus' life have already spread far and wide. People must have been watching and fabricating their own conjectures about him. That's why his return from his trip up North to see John and be baptized by him became news throughout the region (Lk 4:14). People flocked to him to hear his message of God's mercy for all people. At the same time, he did not hold back God's judgment on all the nations (Lk 6). His fame grew as he taught and preached in the surrounding synagogues, but we don't know the details of his message until we hear it preached in his own hometown.

¹ Luke 1:39-45

² Both stories may be found in Matthew 2

Jesus chose the passage from Isaiah to explain who he was called to be and what he intended to do. The year of the Lord's favor for Israel is pretty much on his mind. This is probably a reference to the year of Jubilee commanded in Leviticus 25, a year in which indentured servants were to be released, debts were to be forgiven, and land and property returned to families who had leased or sold them. It was to be a year of radical restoration, but there is little evidence that it was ever practiced in Israel. It was instead projected into the future as an eschatological hope.

Jesus would carry it out in relationships with people from all walks of life, by healing, preaching, teaching, forgiving sins, and calling others to follow him. He demanded that his followers put others first, stop competing with one another, and serve people on the margins. He saw the evil of social injustices and spoke words of healing and reconciliation.

In this passage, Jesus tells the congregants that "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." This is a passage from Isaiah that they as well as we know very well. It speaks of God's determination to save and to renew life. By adding the word "today" Jesus stresses the fulfillment of the prophecy and the immediacy of something new. Projecting God's vision into a distant future is no longer possible.

He also leaves it to people's imagination that he is the one called and entrusted by God for that special mission. Jesus' invitation to see him as the one through whom God is establishing God's realm and leaving a human footprint to follow is valid for us as well. This inaugural address represents the heart of his message and mission. This is the Jesus we follow.

Can you imagine what that "today" must have sounded in the congregants' ears? Jesus is telling them that the good news is available right now; that the time for transformation and renewal is at hand; that God's abundance meant for all people is available today. Jesus is practically inviting them trust God's vision even as they are aware of the hardship of life; even as they know that the odds are stacked against the downtrodden. Will they receive the message?

It's a little like saying to us today: "Trust in the never-failing love of God even as Omicron is overwhelming the planet, hospitals are reaching capacity, physicians and nurses are exhausted, national and local economies are flailing, nations are at war or on the brink of war, and the catastrophic effects of climate change are visible throughout the world." So, in the face of all this, will we receive the message? Will we accept Jesus?

May the same Spirit that moved Jesus to seek a baptism of repentance; the same Spirit that led him into the desert; the same Spirit that inspired him to speak in his synagogue move us to follow him anew in humility and generosity of heart. Let the Church say "Amen."