

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time C:

January 26, 2025

*"Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your own hearing!"*

In today's Gospel of St. Luke, we see something rather amazing, a quiet little miracle, if we have but "eyes to see, and ears to hear." What is that little miracle? If you look at the way that our Gospel passage is put together, you will see that it is a sort of 'composite passage,' as it were, composed of the first four verses of the first chapter of the Gospel, wherein St. Luke announces his purpose in writing the Gospel, and then, we skip directly to the fourth chapter, where we encounter the Lord beginning His Divine ministry in earnest. The result of the encounter with Jesus is simply this: the long-awaited prophecies of old are now fulfilled in the Person of Jesus Christ – believe it and live – don't believe it, and live and die in sorrow!

To get to the heart of this tremendous message of Christ most quickly and expeditiously, we will focus on the second half of the Gospel passage, that is, St. Luke 4. 14-21. What do we find?

Our Lord has come to His home, to the little village where He grew up as a boy, to Nazareth. Now, to understand this homecoming of Jesus to Nazareth, we have to take a step back, to the wedding feast of Cana, in the Gospel of St. John. The day following the wedding feast at Cana, Jesus set out to return to Galilee. In doing my homework for this paper, once again I find that my memory, after being away from the Holy Land for almost thirty years, has played dreadful tricks on me.

In my memory, the little town of Nazareth is situated directly on the Sea of Galilee, but that is not so. Actually, if you look on a map, you will find that Nazareth lies about fifteen miles to the southwest of Sea of Galilee, and another village, Bethsaida, which no longer even exists, once thrived on the very northern coast of the Sea. Why do I mention Bethsaida? Because, as Jesus was leaving the wedding feast of Cana, He met a man named Phillip, and said to him words that would change his life and alter the fate of the world: "Follow Me!" (St. John 1. 43)

Now Phillip was from the town of Bethsaida, the same town from which came two other men: Andrew and Peter, and also his friend, *Nathanael* or *Bartholomew*. What do you think Phillip did after Jesus' invitation to follow Him? He went to his friend, Nathanael and said: "We have found the one Moses spoke of in the Law – and the Prophets, too – Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth." And what do you think Nathanael said, in answer to all of Phillip's enthusiasm? Well, it has become a rather famous, or should I say, infamous, remark? "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" and Phillip replied, 'Come, and see for yourself!' (St. John 1. 45-46) And Our Lord, seeing the hearts of all men, gazes upon Nathanael coming toward Him and said quietly:

*"This man is a true Israelite. In him there is no guile." 'How do You know me,' Nathanael asked Him. 'Before Phillip called you,' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig-tree.' 'Rabbi,' said Nathanael, 'Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel!' 'Do you believe Me just because I told you I saw you under the fig-tree? You shall see much greater things than that!'" (St. John 1. 47-50)*

As you listen to this episode between Nathanael and the Lord, you just might be asking yourselves: What just happened? Why did Nathanael react so much because Jesus told him that he saw him under the fig-tree? We are not completely certain, but both Catholic scholars and the great Dr. Barclay agree that the following account is most probably what happened.

"To the Jews the fig-tree always stood for peace. Their idea of peace was when a man could be undisturbed under his own vine and his own fig-tree." (1) Now, think for just a second. Nathanael, having never personally met the Lord, overheard the remark that Jesus made about him: "Here is a true Israelite. In him there is no guile." Now listen to the rest of Barclay's explanation:

Further, the fig-tree was leafy and shady and it was the custom to sit and meditate under the roof of its branches. No doubt that was what Nathanael had been doing; and no doubt as he sat under the fig-tree he had prayed for the day when God's Chosen One should come. No doubt he had been meditating on the promises of God. And now he felt that Jesus had seen into the very depths of his heart. It was not so much that Jesus had seen him under the fig-tree that surprised Nathanael; it was the fact that Jesus had read the thoughts of his inmost heart. Nathanael said to himself: 'Here is the man who understands my dreams. Here is the man who knows my prayers... Here is the man who can translate the inarticulate sigh of my soul. This must be God's promised anointed one and no other.' (2)

For Nathanael, Jesus didn't just see a man, hiding secretly, praying beneath a fig-tree, rather, Jesus saw the *secret man* who lived in his heart, the man whom *only God could know!* This, and only this is why he can exclaim (as a man without guile!): "Thou art the Son of God! Thou art the King of Israel!"

It is only after all of this, that we can properly put into perspective the fact that Jesus arrives – now – from Cana into Nazareth, His home town. And, as He attends synagogue on Sabbath, He is handed the scroll, and opens it to a challenging passage, the sixty-first chapter of the Prophet Isaiah. Though only a few verses, its depth and richness is profound, so deep and profound that we do not have time to plumb its depths. We will have to content ourselves with just a small portion of the passage.

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, therefore He has anointed Me. He has sent Me to bring glad tidings to the poor..." (St. Luke 4. 18; cf. Isaiah 61. 1)* Who, exactly, are the poor? Are the poor only those people who are 'bad off,' financially? Is Jesus only concerned about our financial needs? Today, there are many preachers who say that, if our faith is great enough, we can call on the Name of Jesus, and claim what we need, and He will provide, not just we need, but for most anything we want to make us happy, because, after all, the Lord wants us to be happy. This is referred to as 'name and claim' theology. It's also a bunch of hooey because it makes a mockery of the Cross of Christ. So, what about it? Who are the poor? We are all poor in the eyes of God. But, how are we to understand our *poverty* before God; what does it look like?

I think our Holy Father Emeritus, Pope Benedict gives a rather good description of how we should look in his new book, *Jesus of Nazareth*. Writes the Holy Father:

These are the people who do not flaunt their achievements before God. They do not stride into God's presence as if they were partners able to engage with Him on an equal footing; they do not lay claim to a reward for what they have done. These are people who know that their poverty also has an interior dimension; they are lovers who simply want to let God bestow His gifts upon them and thereby to live in inner harmony with God's nature and word. The saying of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux about one day standing before God with empty hands, and holding them open to Him, describes the spirit of these poor one of God. They come with empty hands; not with hands that grasp and clutch, but with hands that open and give and thus are ready to receive from God's bountiful goodness. (3)

This is a poverty to which we can all aspire – no matter what our financial position. In this poverty, with open hands which mirror an open heart like Nathanael's, we can hear the *glad tidings of Christ which proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind and to prisoners, freedom*.

But there is one more point upon which everything else rests. Note the bold words that Jesus proclaims after He is finished with the scroll. "*Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your own hearing!*" (St. Luke 4. 21) One wonders how the people must have felt when Jesus spoke that last sentence? The Gospel goes on to say: "*All who were present spoke favourably of Him; they marveled at the appealing discourse which came from His lips. They also asked, 'Is this not Joseph's son?'*" (St. Luke 4. 22)

The people in the synagogue that day were being challenged in their day, as we are in ours, to make a great leap of faith which really consists of two actions: one is an act of the intellect, which by way of the interior eye scans the whole horizon of prophecy and says "Yes, this Man before me fits the description of the Messiah for Whom we've been waiting"; and two, an act of the heart, which moves in love and gratitude towards a Saviour Who has come to redeem us. Both acts, the act of knowledge in the intellect and love in the heart melt into one as they focus on this Jesus of Nazareth. Both acts focus into a *decision* about Him – *yes or no*. That is to say, there could not be then, nor can there be now, a middle ground about Jesus: He is either *Yes or No*; He is either *Lord*, or He is *Not Lord*. Pure and simple.

In our world today, many people try to side-step this issue about Christ and His Church by claiming 'tolerance,' explaining that there are so many ways to Heaven, that we cannot just simply say that 'Jesus is the One.' C. S. Lewis shows the falsity of this position in an admirable way in the third volume of his *Space Trilogy*, *That Hideous Strength*, introducing us to the poor, young man Mark Studdock, who is being lured into a wicked group of people, a supposed scientific society named the N.I.C.E., the National Institute for Coordinated Experiments. He hasn't quite made up his mind about these people. A young professor at a good, English college, with no real, strong, moral convictions, he is being tempted by power, money and ambition – quite a

heady mix, no? He is leaving the Institute one night, when he meets a fellow professor, an old, conservative man, whom he loathes (the young man refers to him as Bill the Blizzard). The N.I.C.E. is trying to lure the older professor in, too. Listen to their conversation, since it truly instructs us about how we need to form our minds and hearts, that is to say, *our consciences* about Him Who is Truth Itself:

After this Mark found himself engaged by his left-hand neighbour and did not see Bill the Blizzard until he met him in the hall after dinner. He was in his overcoat and just ready to go to his car... 'Take my advice, Studdock,' he said. 'Or at least think it over. I don't believe in Sociology myself, but you've got quite a decent career before you if you stay at Bracton. You'll do yourself no good by getting mixed up with the N.I.C.E. – and by God, you'll do nobody else any good either.' 'I suppose there are two views about everything,' said Mark. 'Eh?' Two views? There are a dozen views about everything until you know the answer. Then there's never more than one. But it's no affair of mine. Good night.' (4)

To let you know that a stand for Truth is not always easy, *Bill the Blizzard*, as he is witheringly referred to, will be murdered by the elements of the N.I.C.E., just as Jesus, Himself, died for Truth.

When Jesus says "*Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your own hearing!*" to the Jews of old, and to us right now, He simply means that He is the Answer, He is "*the Way, the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father but through Him*" (cf. St. John 14. 6)

So, in short, like Nathanael after the wedding feast at Cana, like the people in that synagogue two thousand years ago, we are faced with the very same decision: Jesus, yes or no? "*Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your own hearing!*" *Yes or No?*

1. William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1 of 2, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1977, pg. 93
2. Ibid.
3. His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Doubleday, New York, 2007, pg. 76
4. C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, Simon & Schuster, 1996, pgs.71-72