

Homily for January 27, 2013

In today's Gospel we heard Jesus read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah proclaiming the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Many of his hearers, if not all, had memorized those words, as was their custom. It is only Jesus' conclusion that startled them: "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." These words shocked them because they knew the meaning of the word translated into English as "fulfilled." "Fulfilled" is a word that we hear rather often in the New Testament, and I think many, if not most, of us get our understanding of the word "fulfilled" from Evangelicals, who have a different understanding from that of the Church. Evangelicals believe that the Old Testament predicts specific events about Jesus; then in the New Testament those events happen. The Church, however, teaches that the Old Testament gives us types and figures and promises that are clarified and completed in the New Testament. As St. Augustine said, The Old Testament is the New Testament concealed; the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed.

As Jesus began his ministry, he said that the passage from Isaiah was fulfilled. It seems clear to us that Jesus was "anointed" by the Spirit "to bring glad tidings to the poor." But he also proclaimed a year acceptable to the Lord. In Jewish tradition a year acceptable to the Lord is a Jubilee year. As the Israelites were entering the Promised Land, God commanded them to let their land lie idle every seven years; there was to be no sowing or reaping. Whatever came up, they, their household, and their livestock might eat, but so might anyone and anything that was hungry, even the wild animals. Every 50th year, however, that year after 7 times 7 years, they were to celebrate a Jubilee year. Not only was the land to lie idle, but everything and everyone was to be restored to the position of 50 years before. Land that had been sold because of hard times must be returned free of charge to its original owner. People who fell upon such hard time that they hired themselves out or sold themselves into slavery were to be freed. All debts were to be cancelled.¹ Though Jewish tradition held that Moses received the commandments in regard to the Jubilee year on Mount Sinai, the Jewish people had long since dispensed with these commandments, and the prophets denounced them for doing so.

So here in the words Jesus reads, nothing is new. Jesus is proclaiming Isaiah's words which refer to commandments received from God himself as his gospel, his good news. The New Testament is the Old Testament revealed. Clearly this is not the only time he proclaims this kind of good news. However, this fulfillment did not end with Jesus' ascension into heaven, for he was not

¹ Old Testament references: Exodus 21: 1-6; Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:1-13; and Deuteronomy 15:1-6.

Homily for January 27, 2013

proclaiming just his personal mission. The fulfillment proclaimed by Jesus was also the proclamation of our mission, the mission of all who claim him as master, lord, and savior. He said to his disciples and, by extension, he says to us, "Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12). The word of Jesus is our work. Jesus said that the way we treat the least among our fellow human beings, that is the way we are treating him. Jesus said that when we feed the hungry and clothe the naked, we feed and clothe him. Jesus said that when we treat others with the justice and mercy they deserve because they are human beings made in the image of God, that is the way we are responding to Him. We are now the hands and feet of Christ. We are to continue the fulfillment Jesus began. The New Testament is the Old Testament revealed and its promises renewed.

When Jesus comes in the final fulfillment, will he say to us, "Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me"? Or will he say, "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me." "Come, share your master's joy"? (Matthew 25:45, 40, and 23).