

‘The Word of God for the People of God’. Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC Palmetto, 24th January 2010

Have you ever been in the situation where you’ve read words on a page but you haven’t understood them? Perhaps you’ve been reading something particularly complicated and you’ve had to go back and read it again, perhaps even with the aid of a dictionary. Or perhaps what you were reading was simple enough but you were tired or preoccupied and you realize that your eyes might have read the words but somehow your mind hasn’t absorbed them. Sometimes something similar happens when someone is speaking to us; we suddenly realize that unfortunately we have missed something someone has said to us – either not understood it or not even heard it, because our attention wandered. Maybe this has happened to you this morning either before or even during worship. And what about the word of God? Have you truly heard it this morning? Did you truly listen as Wendy/Harry read the OT Scripture? If you did, were you addressed by it or was it just so many words? And what about the reading from Luke’s gospel that I’ve just read? When I said the words: ‘This is the word of God for the people of God’, could you give any meaning to your response: ‘Thanks be to God’ or again was the Gospel passage just so many words? Were you challenged by anything in God’s word? Did you absorb anything or was it just water off a duck’s back?

Picture the scene, if you will. Jesus is in the synagogue of his hometown, Nazareth. Nazareth is the place of his childhood, where he played and worshipped. When he enters the synagogue familiar to him from childhood attendance, he knows the people. He knows the faces and probably the names. What is he doing there? Well, he is not there as a tourist, admiring the architecture. He is there because it was, as Luke stressed, his custom to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath day. Wherever Jesus happened to be on a Saturday morning, he would walk to the nearest synagogue. We know that it is the Saturday morning, rather than the first synagogue service of the Jewish Sabbath on Friday evening, because the Scriptures are read, as they still are today, all over the world in synagogues on Saturday morning. Readers were, and still are in the Sabbath morning service, appointed before the service began.

Whether Jesus chose this passage from Isaiah or it was the one appointed for the day we cannot be sure. What we can be sure of is that in this, the oldest account of a synagogue service, we are given the keynote to the entire ministry of Jesus. All three synoptic gospels recount this story, but only Luke gives us such a fuller account and only he places it at the very beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. As Fred Craddock notes: ‘Luke places the Nazareth visit first because it is first, not chronologically but programmatically. That is to say that this event announces who Jesus is, of what his ministry consists, what his church will be and do and what will be the response to both Jesus and the church.’¹

We know that whatever we take to be the heart of the gospel will be the central shaping force in our life of faith. Maybe it’s a good idea to do what Luke instructs. As readers of Luke’s words, let us then place this text as the central concern and even plumb line of

¹ Fred Craddock (1990) *Luke*, John Knox Press, p 61

Jesus' teaching. In today's passage we learn what Jesus came to do. In so far as we measure our lives against text, we are following Jesus' ministry.

He claims to have fulfilled this – not one off, but continually. Fulfilling.

What does Jesus mean when, having read the Scripture, he sits down to preach (as was the custom) and opens with the words: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' He is surely not simply saying that Isaiah predicted something and now it has come true. No the prophecy he quotes is not like a weather forecast which can only come true, or fail to come true, once. Would you like to know the weather forecast for this past Monday? No? Why ever not? Isn't it useful to you any longer? Frankly, it is not. What you want to know is the weather forecast for the coming Monday, for tomorrow, especially if you have a particular activity planned. Anyone about to hold an open-air concert tomorrow night wants the forecast for January 25th, not for January 18th. But biblical prophecy isn't like that. It isn't a prediction that can be fulfilled only once. It can be fulfilled again and again.

If you look on the front of the bulletin, you see the same words from Isaiah. In effect, they form Jesus' mission statement. He intends to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. What year was that then? Was it only the year he happened to preach in the synagogue in Nazareth? No, it was that year, but it is also this year. It is any year when we, the church let these words be fulfilled in us. The 'today' Jesus speaks about is any day when Isaiah's words are fulfilled.

Look just below Jesus' mission statement, borrowed from Isaiah, and you will find on the bulletin the mission statement of FUMC Palmetto. Our mission statement. Not only was the spirit of the Lord on Jesus, but also it is on us, equipping us to be instruments of God. We are called to be neighbors in this community and world. And why neighbors? Because Jesus, most famously in his story about the Good Samaritan, asks who was neighbor to the man in need. Because Jesus' own Scriptures, say: 'you must love your neighbor as yourself' (Leviticus 19:18). We don't make it up, you know, Scripture. It's not whatever we would like it to be. It is the written word of God to us, now, this year, and this day, whenever we understand and apply it in our lives.

Why do we gather together to hear the Word of God? We can read it, of course, individually, but as it is read, and interpreted, it is meant for the people of God. Scriptures becomes the Word to each of us as each of us hears it. God's word is a living word. It always has been. Why was any of it written down? Not surely because of nostalgia. It was not a matter of seeing what you could recall, but to address the people of God in the present day. Why were any of the biblical books collected? It is not that God speaks only in the words of Scripture but that we believe that he has given us Scripture to speak to us. Scripture isn't any old writing. Words only become Scripture, that is, text regarded as holy an authoritative, as they impact on real people in real time and in real places. It is not the word of God until it is interpreted. So, in our passage from Nehemiah, we learn (verse 8) 'They read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation.' They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

So I ask now to picture this scene an open-air synagogue gathering from centuries before Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth. The people have gathered not to hear a clever speech from Ezra, but to hear the word of God. When Ezra opens, the Torah, the law, he prays, and the people prostrate themselves with their faces to the ground in response to God's living presence. So today, we must not lose sight of the primacy of the Scriptures in worship. And these Scriptures need interpretation in terms of our life, here and now. Then, indeed, they become the word of God for the people of God. As a famous Methodist preacher, Will Willimon has pithily put it: 'At the heart of preaching is either a God who speaks, and who speaks now ... or preaching is silly.'²

I don't know if it struck you as Wendy/Harry was reading the passage from Nehemiah, but those assembled to hear the reading from the law are described again and again as 'all the people'. In the space of eight verses, the word 'all' or the phrase 'all the people' occurs nine times: 'All the people gathered together... the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding ... and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. The Ezra bless the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen" ...and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD you God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.'

Here we get a rare glimpse in Scripture, and again in our passage from Luke, of how worship actually takes place. And the unity of the people gathered for worship is emphasized. Now don't let's romanticize this and imagine that everybody who believed in God in those days had precisely the same backgrounds and the same opinions. Don't let's say: 'Well, it's different for us. Look around this congregation; think of all our different ages, circumstances, and viewpoints: how can we possibly be united in worship?' Just like all the people in the square before the Water Gate in Jerusalem and just like all the people in the synagogue in Nazareth, when we worship we gather together as one people in worship. A primary function of this worship is to be addressed as God's people by God's word. When we collectively hear this word and collectively respond, then the scripture read truly becomes 'the word of God for the people of God'.

It is quite possible to seem very devoted to the Bible, but still not hear it as the Word of God. It is quite possible to pay lip service to Scripture but not to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it. It is quite possible not to do the work but just pluck words out from it, especially words directed at other people and which seem to back up our prejudices and pre-conceived notions. Isn't this what happens in one of the scenes described in this morning's readings?

Our two Scripture passages this morning have in common a people gathered to hear God's word in worship. However, the verses which follow in Nehemiah 8 and Luke 4 couldn't be more different. After hearing the words of the law and their interpretation, all

² William Willimon (2005) *Proclamation and Theology*, Abingdon Press, p 2

the people, we are told, are moved – whether with tears of regret or tears of joy we cannot be sure. But they then do as instructed, celebrating and sending portions to those without food. And the hearers of Jesus's sermon in Nazareth – what do they do when Jesus tells them that Isaiah's words have been fulfilled in their hearing? Well they cannot believe that this homegrown boy could be God's agent. Then they express their rejection of Jesus and Jesus compares them to ancient Israelites rejecting the prophet Elijah and the prophet Elisha. As if this is not enough, Jesus then reminds them that Elijah and Elisha were welcomed more by foreigners than by the people of God. At this they drive him out of town, intending to hurl him off the cliff. At this point, this particular representation of the people of God ceases to be the people of God. By their rejection, they are ensuring that the reading of Isaiah 61 and Jesus's sermon on this passage are emphatically not the word of God for the people of God.

This teaches us that there is nothing automatic in our being the people of God today. Whether or not we are depends on the response of this church to the word which we have heard in Scripture today. God's word will remain just words on a page if today it does not become fulfilled in us as the community of the faithful. There was no room in the inn in Bethlehem where Jesus was born and there was no room in the synagogue in Nazareth where Jesus was brought up. There was no room for the God of love who came in humility to bring good news to the poor, 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. Is there room in this church for a God of love with such a mission? Is there room in our hearts for a God who maybe works in ways that we not expect or that do not come naturally to us?

We need to keep coming back to this text to measure our work as a church. It is not that mission is always to those outside the church. Mission is being sent no one specifies how far. The person next to you this morning might be the very person needing this Scripture to be fulfilled today. But whoever and wherever it is fulfilled, Scripture becomes the Word of God when it is truly heard and responded to by the church as the people of God. As on your bulletin: 'The spirit of the Lord is on me to preach good news to the poor . . . , to proclaim freedom for the prisoners ;;; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor'. This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.