

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
January 27, 2019 3rd Sunday of Year C Luke 1: 1-4; 4:14-21

For the past few Sundays, the Gospel readings have been showing us who Jesus is. Today's Gospel speaks of what Jesus does; it presents us with His "mission statement," the summation of what all His ministry will be about. He has come, He says, "to announce glad tidings to the poor, liberty to captives, sight to the blind, and to announce a year of favor from the Lord." We might ask ourselves, "Do I really want He says He can offer—even, more basic, do I think I need what He offers." We may say to ourselves, "I am not really poor, nor am I captive, nor am I blind, either physically or spiritually—I'm open and tolerant." Jumping ahead in the Gospel of Luke, we hear Jesus say that He is a "physician" who has come to heal those who are sick, and not those who consider themselves well. So, maybe I think He doesn't have to make a house-call where I live—I'm OK. Or, maybe I prefer to medicate myself with any of the creature comforts that promise to heal the hurts, disappointments, the pain of the past.

If we read again the passage from Isaiah that Jesus said was being fulfilled in His listeners' hearing, we find one thread that unites all the different themes. That thread may provide something we do indeed need--the promise of freedom. The illusion of contemporary life is that because we have so many different things from which to choose--everything from a presidential candidate to a brand of shampoo to a car, to an insurance plan, to lifestyle--the impression is given that because we have so many options available to us, that that's what freedom is all about. And yet, often enough this very sort of freedom leads to a kind of paralysis. Uncertainty about not knowing which is the best choice, which investment will truly be to my advantage, leaves the situation that often enough we're completely bewildered by all the options open to us. By the time we finish checking out Consumer Reports or Yelp reviews or any of the other purchase guides, we may be just as confused as when we began, and just as easily intimidated by a fast-talking salesman. It takes a lot of time to be an "educated consumer." Recent studies suggest that one reason why we feel so harried is because so much of our time is absorbed by the process of deciding what to do with that time.

True freedom, the freedom that Jesus offers is something deeper than what our consumer society offers prospective buyers. It is an interior form of freedom, basically a freedom from fear--freedom from the anxieties, the insecurities, the threats we perceive to our very existence, to our sense of well-being, to feelings of self-worth; freedom from the intuitions we have, at all those random moments, of our own

inadequacy. It is freedom from the temptation to look at some good thing, and presume that that thing can plug up all the holes, fill all the voids in my life—that some person, a certain kind of job or career, money, sex, a certain belief or institution, whatever, can save me, can rescue me, can make everything right again. It is the ability to be at ease, to be at peace with oneself.

Faith in Jesus provides the possibility of living right now a life that is honest and genuine and fulfilling, because I see things for what they really are—not just for what I want them to be or do for me. Faith provides the freedom that enables us to live realistically in the world, because we know the limitations and the possibilities of what any person, or thing, or idea can provide. So, we come to the point whereby we can say to ourselves, in so many words, “I do not expect or demand that any person can meet and fulfill all my needs. Nor do I have to kill myself with work at my career to prove to the world and to myself that ‘I am somebody.’ Nor do I harbor the notion that some religious belief or creed can deal with all the ambiguities of life. That faith provides freedom so that when God is absolute and everything else relative, things then have their proper place in my life. I can appreciate and enjoy them for what they actually are, and not for the illusion of what I want them to be or do for me.

The question remains, “Do I really want the freedom Jesus can provide?” Or do I prefer to live amid this company of the many little gods and shrines that we are so often inclined to worship—egoism, careerism, relationships of dependency and manipulation, the pursuit of money or sex or alcohol or drugs, whatever? Do I prefer to be captive to the pressures of those “gods”, because I dare not risk living without them? Do I prefer to remain blind to the reality that these things can never make me whole, but then this is all that I've ever known? Do I realize that so long as I measure my worth as a human being by these external standards or criteria, I am bound to be poor—poor in the sense that I do not have that wealth of freedom to discern what it is I really need, what can be helpful for me, and what just caters to the most pitiable aspects of my ego? And do I leave myself open to the danger that what first appeared to me as a godsend, as the answer to all my prayers--when it disappoints, when it fails to deliver, when it does not live up to expectations—then that pseudo-savior can turn into a demon. What I once adored, I can come to hate.

So, in rereading this morning's Gospel, we might find ourselves listed among those whom Jesus came to save. For there really is only one basic kind of sin, a “sin” this springs not so much from evil intentions as it does from human blindness, weakness, fear, and need. It is the sin of idolatry, the first of the 10 Commandments, “I am the Lord your God; you shall not have false gods before me.” Idolatry is that perennial temptation of the human heart to invest too much of oneself in some

creaturely thing; this tendency to inflate the worth of something; this tendency to exploit some thing. It is from this that Jesus can save us. He promises to do it today—not just to some realm beyond the grave. St. Augustine wrote in his Confessions, “O God, we were made for Thee, for Thee alone, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.” Only God filled the hole in the human heart, but unfortunately we find many “god-substitutes” along the way.

Coming to this awareness can be the work of a lifetime, and how do we learn it? Probably, like most things, we learn it the hard way. If we jump ahead a few chapters in St. Luke's Gospel, we have the story of Jesus and the apostles coming to follow Him after their miraculous catch of fish. It's only when these fishermen have finally attained what they've always dreamed of—only after their nets are teeming with fish--do they realize that this is not enough. Only the living and true God can meet all the needs of the human heart. It is only when their small “god” has collapsed, only after they realize the insufficiency of this, the greatest catch of fish they ever had, that they can be open to the possibilities of what Jesus offers. As the poet Gertrude Stein once said, “When you get there, you may realize there's no there there.” But Jesus wants us to escape pursuing the false path of illusion, the dog chasing its own tail.

Maybe there is an easier route, maybe we don't have to see ourselves, our lives, those we love, burnt out the pursuit of empty promises and pipe-dreams. Let's pray that we can be open to that same Spirit that impelled Jesus in his ministry, so that we can possess that same freedom that He possessed. By our kinship with Christ through baptism, we can have a measure of that same trust, that same hope, that wisdom and insight to know what matters in life, and the courage to live by that vision. As we welcome the risen Jesus in Holy Communion, let's pray for that gift of interior freedom whereby we can use wisely and well the good things that God has provided us with.