

Reflection for Sunday, January 30, 2022

The Rebel Christ

We sing of Jesus, a Jew, born to a woman in poverty in a time of upheaval and political oppression. He knew human joy and sorrow. So filled with the Holy Spirit was he that in him people experienced the presence of God among them. We sing praise to God incarnate.

Jesus announced the coming of God's reign—a commonwealth not of domination but of peace, justice, and reconciliation. He healed the sick and fed the hungry. He forgave sins and freed those held captive by all manner of demonic powers. He crossed barriers of race, class, culture, and gender. He preached and practised unconditional love—love of God, love of neighbour, love of friend, love of enemy—and he commanded his followers to love one another as he loved them.

May the peace of the Lord be always with you.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, even as you called Jeremiah and set the prophet apart from before birth, you continue to call women and men to yourself and set them apart for service to your kingdom. By your grace, help us to be obedient to your call, even if that call may not be as glamorous as we imagined. Help us not to make excuses or look to our deficiencies, but rather, remind us of your faithfulness. You call and you equip. Equip us then to carry out the work that you have for us. Send your Spirit upon us as we go forth. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

The season of Epiphany marks a celebration of God's revelation in Jesus Christ to the whole world. The arrival of the magi to worship a newborn king begins this season. Jesus has come, not for a few but for the many—in fact, for all persons!

Epiphany is a significant context for noting the call of Jeremiah. He was called to be a spokesperson (prophet) for God, with God guiding him on what to say. As the book unfolds, Jeremiah's vocation (calling) was in his "calling all members of the community back to their vocation as followers of Israel's God" (Carolyn J. Sharp). This was Jeremiah's mission—to all the people.

In the season of Epiphany, when we marvel that Jesus Christ has come for all the world, like Jeremiah, we recognize our calling to proclaim this message to all. As Jesus said: *"Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation"* (Mark 16:15). The message of Christ is *for all*, and our calling during Epiphany—and in all seasons—is to proclaim this message *to all*. God's call is for all persons to serve God, no matter what their condition, situation, or status. Jeremiah himself was "only a boy," but the call of God came to him.

The Epiphany season says Christ came for all persons; and Christ came to use all persons to serve—in whatever ways. Despite objections, God promises to be with us. We can hear God's call to us in Jesus Christ—no matter who we are or what we are. God calls and connects with us and others, as Epiphany reminds us.

Throughout the Bible and in our own lives, the experience of Jeremiah is born out: God chooses us. God chooses us to serve God, to come to faith in Christ, to be drawn into the church, and to be witnesses and disciples of Jesus Christ in this world. The initiative in our salvation and in our callings and ministries is God's. The promises we receive from God are grounded in God's call, God's taking us as we are, and God's calling us into who God wants us to be as God's people engaged in mission and ministry. God takes the initiative in calling us and continuing to be with us. We need not be afraid, for God is with us to rescue and deliver. This is the courage that comes from the conviction

that God's purposes can guide our lives and that what God has begun in us will be brought to completion. This conviction strengthens our faith as we are upheld by God's Spirit and led in the ways to which God has called us. So it is for Jesus. The story of Jesus returning to his hometown synagogue began with so much promise. He stood up and read Isaiah's description of the messiah: one who would bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, and freedom to the captives. Then he claimed that this old prophecy is being fulfilled in their midst. His neighbours, friends, and family looked at each other and smiled. *"All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth."* The year of the Lord's favour, right here in Nazareth. How nice! *"They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'"*

What is this amazement about? N. T. Wright suggests that the people were not amazed that Jesus was such a good speaker; rather, they are amazed at "his gracious words"—that is, his message of grace. However, their amazement seems to quickly turn into doubt. Jesus was a familiar neighbour, merely "Joseph's son." Quite likely they expected and wanted something else, for Jesus' listeners' expectations of the Messiah were rooted in the hope that the occupying power of the Roman Empire would be soundly defeated. The Messiah was to be no mere messenger of grace, but a political and military leader who would take on the power of Rome.

The passage Jesus chooses to read in the synagogue suggests only a mission of grace and moreover, healing *for everyone*. Perhaps the all-inclusive character of the grace Jesus proclaims explains the people's anger. The people were "filled with rage" because Jesus proclaimed a grace that was wider and more generous than they were. Grace is more difficult to really embrace than we often assume. We are happy when the "right" people are forgiven, accepted, or healed, but we're not so

sure that we want those things extended to people outside our favoured circles, or that we want to extend that grace ourselves.

Paul knows you just cannot say what love is without saying Jesus! He knows only Christ can make unconditional lovers out of otherwise selfish human beings. He knows this because Christ has done this for him. This is not a condition we can reproduce. Rather, if we love at all, we love because—when we were jealous and boastful, arrogant and rude, irritable and resentful and insisting upon our own way—the patient and kind God first loved us, is *still* loving us.

The people of Nazareth who gathered on the Sabbath that day in the synagogue may not have been wealthy or powerful, but many thought of themselves as God's people in terms of privilege in the negative sense of favouritism. That led them to resent a grace that was extended to others and, ironically, kept them from joyously receiving grace themselves, when it was so publicly announced. Jesus' revelation that the good news is for the whole world, not just those of us who have known Jesus all our lives, shouldn't offend us or make us want to run Jesus off a cliff. It's not a threat but an invitation.

Jesus is indeed bringing good news to the poor, sight to the blind, all of this, today in our midst—and we can be a part of it, spreading this good news all over the world. May it be so! Thanks be to God. Amen.

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