

October 21, 2012

Hilarion the Great

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When the Evangelist Luke began his account of Jesus' public ministry with the reading of Isaiah (4:18-19), he also used that prophetic text to provide a literary synopsis of the Gospel story.

The passage begins, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me." Here Luke conveys Jesus' sense of the significance of his baptism in the Jordan, when "the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon him" (3:21-22). To indicate the change wrought by the baptism, Luke afterwards wrote, "Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee" (4:14).

Luke's is the only one of the four Gospels that relates this reception of the Holy Spirit to Jesus' prayer. He writes, "while he prayed, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon him." Luke suggests, that is to say, that the Holy Spirit was given to Jesus in response to his prayer. This interpretation is consistent with Luke's version of Jesus' instruction on prayer: "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" (11:13; contrast Matthew 7:11).

In the Isaian text Jesus read in the synagogue, there are other clear references to the larger story told by Luke. It declares, for instance, that Jesus was anointed "to preach the Gospel to the poor." This is precisely what we find shortly afterwards, when Jesus "lifted up his eyes toward his disciples and said, '*blessed are you poor*, for yours is the kingdom of God'" (Luke 6:20). Elsewhere in Luke's Gospel Jesus emphasizes that the message of salvation is directed to the poor (12:13-41; 16:19-31; 18:18-23).

Isaiah's continuing list of those to whom the Messiah ministers---the captives, the brokenhearted, the blind, and the oppressed---corresponds closely to the message sent to the very man who had baptized Jesus: "Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them" (7:22). It corresponds, likewise, to the Lord's catalogue of those summoned to the great banquet: "Bring in here the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind" (14:21).

In Luke's narrative the ministry of Jesus illustrates all the details of the Isaian prophecy. Thus, when the prophet declared that the Messiah would "heal the brokenhearted," Luke believed their number included the ostracized leper (5:12-16) and the parents bereaved of their children (7:11-17; 8:49-56). Isaiah's promise that the Messiah would "proclaim liberty to the captives" was fulfilled in the repentant woman (7:36-50) and those set free from demonic possession (4:41; 8:26-39; 9:37-49). Isaiah's pledge of liberation for the oppressed was amply redeemed in the paralytic (5:17-26), the man with the withered hand (6:6-11), the centurion's servant (7:1-10), the bleeding woman (8:40-48), the crippled "daughter of Abraham" (13:10-17), and the ten lepers (17:11-19). And the prophecy of sight for the blind was fulfilled along the road through Jericho (18:35-43).

Finally, Isaiah also foretold that the Messiah would "proclaim the year acceptable to the Lord." Luke, for his part, was in no doubt what year was intended. The "year acceptable to the Lord" was "the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar" (3:1). Alone among the Evangelists, Luke fixes the year Jesus was baptized and his public ministry commenced. Like the Hebrew prophets before him, Luke identifies the exact political setting in which God's Word enters history. The Lord of the prophets takes the political order very seriously.

According to Luke, then, everything was ready: Tiberius was on the throne at Rome, Pontius Pilate represented him in Judea, Herod governed Galilee, his brother Philip was in charge of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, and Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests. This was the determined setting in which "the word of God came to John the son of Zachariah in the wilderness."

This was the year foretold by Isaiah; this, truly, was "the year acceptable to the Lord." Everything was now prepared for the manifestation of the Messiah, who confessed the fact when he arose and declared, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

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