



January 24th 2010 - The Rev. Scott Pittendrigh

Text: Luke 4:14-21

Using resources by John Shea; Barbara Brown Taylor; and Richard Rohr.

I wish to speak to you in the name of God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the past twelve days the world has witnessed a "scene of desolation that strains at the very edge of apocalypse." The scale of death, grief, injury and suffering in the wake of the Haiti earthquake surpasses all effort to frame it in our understanding or sensibility, even though it has been nearly two weeks since the initial, shocking, images of this event came tumbling into our living rooms. "It is too big for us," one journalist stated at the time. I think it is still too big for us, still too disturbing to look at so many of the heartbreaking images. And we say this as Canadians who are mere witnesses. Trying to understand what it might be like for Haitians despite all we have seen, read and heard, "exhausts the mind", as the CBC's Rex Murphy put it. No one has to convince us of this. We are all in agreement.

It is the truth for all of us: that people are suffering and we must do all we can to care for these people in what will be much, much, more than "their hour of need." Something like this has a way of bringing us together – all of us—all denominations, all religions, and those with no religious- affiliations or faith-adherences. No one in the world says, "I don't care about those people in Haiti!" and turns a blind eye or walks by on the other side. No religious group says: "Our religion forbids us to help victims of earthquakes."

While in the past, some religions, have wrongly interpreted the natural events of the earth's activities as God's wrath, vengeance or judgment upon people, most, (but unfortunately, not all) would not hold such an interpretation today. It is good that we live in a world like this one -- that has responded so quickly and compassionately to Haiti.

I also found it interesting to read in a TC editorial which was not written by the journalist from a religious perspective, but still felt the need to pose the question about the earthquake in Haiti: "Could God be this cruel?" For some, God's hand is not seen in the good events of human life, but only in the bad or when something so devastating as the Haiti earthquake occurs. God must have had a hand in something we find so hard to comprehend (is how some view this). God must be the cruel one here.

And yet, Jesus constantly shows us that God is wherever people are suffering and in need. The persistent message of Jesus was: that God goes to where the poor are and reminds all who are listening that in God's eyes the poor have worth; that God's reign of justice can only happen when the oppressed, the burdened and the battered are set free.

What made the Haiti earthquake so much more intensified was, of course, Haiti's extreme poverty. Those with the least to begin with, always suffer more sharply. Whether it was the Asian Tsunami in 2004 or the Haiti earthquake nearly two weeks ago, you can bet the numbers were as high as they were because of poverty – poor infrastructure, poor quality housing, no funds for seismic upgrading as we can afford here in this country. The world is coming together NOW to help them (thanks be to God), but the



world was not as aware of their extreme poverty before this terrible event occurred. The poor have always suffered the most throughout history. This is the same today as it was in Jesus' day.

When Jesus tried to challenge a system that kept people poor or marginalized he upset a lot of people. Not unlike what happens today when we are confronted by someone who holds up the "social gospel" to us and calls us to be aware of and respond to those on the margins of society. Such voices today can hit us in our comfort zones and we want to silence such voices. These are the voices that make us aware that the Christ is not only the one who comforts and rescues us, but the Christ is also the one who challenges and upsets us, telling us the truth so clearly that we will do appalling things to make him shut up. If we don't believe that, maybe it's because we have not recognized Christ in some of the offensive people God has sent our way. Not all of them, mind you, but some of them—people sent to yank our chains and upset our equilibrium so we do not confuse our own ideas of God with God.

When Jesus tried to say that God's love and compassion for the poor, God's good news to the suffering, knows no religious boundaries, people got very angry with him.

In today's gospel we hear all about this. We hear first how Jesus' Galilean ministry begins. We are told that he returns to Galilee and that his reputation was spreading throughout the countryside, that he taught in their synagogues and that everyone praised him. Then we hear how he comes into the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth and seems to have the role of lector or reader. He stands up and picks out his reading. Immediately he is going to tell them who he is. This is his "inaugural address," given at the beginning of his ministry. In effect he tells them, using the words of the prophet Isaiah, "This is what I stand for." As soon as he connects the spiritual gospel with the social gospel, all of a sudden the people's praise turns to upset. Watch how it happens.

"The Spirit of God is upon me, he has chosen me, anointed me."

"That's a good beginning", they think. "That's good charismatic language." All the listeners are excited.

"He has sent me to bring good news to the poor."

"Oh, oh, where is he going with that?"

"To proclaim liberty to those who are in prison."

What does this mean? Is he against capital punishment?"

"And recovery of sight to the blind."

"Oh well, we can spiritualize that easily enough. He's giving new faith to people without faith."

Why, of all the passages in the Hebrew prophets, did he pick this verse as his inaugural address? Isaiah 61:1-2 ends with a climax that would not have been lost on his audience: "To set the downtrodden free, and to proclaim the Lord's year of favor."

"Oh my gosh, – he's calling for the Jubilee Year, when all financial debts are forgiven! How can he do this?"

Jesus rolls up the scroll, gives it back to the assistant, and sits down. You can almost hear the uncomfortable silence in the room. "And all eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to



speak to them. 'This text is being fulfilled today, even as you listen.'" Or as another translation (The Message) puts it: "You've just heard Scripture make history. It came true, just now in this place." Jesus is saying here: "That's what I stand for. That's my party platform."

I also find it very interesting to look at what part of the scripture Jesus does NOT read in the synagogue that day! Jesus stopped after reading the words: "...to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." He didn't continue the sentence. His audience was familiar with the scriptures - perhaps some of them even knew these passages by heart - and were no doubt waiting to hear the rest of the verse - ALL of verse 2, which reads: "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who mourn in Zion..." In "Zion," not those who are gentiles, or outsiders, in other words. He did not read those words. This is a defining moment in Jesus' ministry - and it sets the stage for everything he is going to teach over the next three years.

By not reading "and the day of vengeance of our God", Jesus is suggesting that his audience begin to look at God, and their relationship with God, in a NEW way. No longer is this a tribal God. No longer is this a God who is only on the side of the Jewish people. This is a God for all people. Jesus is teaching of a God who reaches beyond tribal barriers, beyond race, beyond nationality and language and, yes - even religion. Initially, the crowd is amazed that a carpenter's son knows how to string phrases together, and can quote from scripture with such authority. And then his words begin to sink in...and they get angry -- very angry!

And Jesus doesn't help matters (as you will here next Sunday when we hear the rest of this chapter) by reminding them of the times in the past when God sent his prophets not to the Jewish people who were in need, but to people who lived beyond their national borders - to the outsiders -- to the enemies.

The minute he denied their special status he went from favorite son to degenerate stranger, who offended them so badly they decided to do away with him right then and there. It is a short trip from approval to condemnation.

I don't think we have to have lived in Jesus' world to understand that. That is how sensitive we are (even today) to being told that our enemies are God's friends. That is how angry we can get when someone suggests that God loves the people we won't sit next to—the people who disturb and offend us, and who belong to God just as surely as we do. No matter how hard we try, we cannot seem to get God to respect our boundaries. God keeps plowing right through them, inviting us to follow or get out of the way. The problem is not that we are loved any less. The problem is that people we cannot stand are loved just as much as we are, by a God with an upsetting sense of community. This is what Jesus was proclaiming as he began his ministry. This is his "party platform." We see from all this that Jesus is not a Messiah who fits. He is a piece of the puzzle who changes the entire puzzle itself. This is someone who operates almost entirely outside the lines.

We believe in a Lord who cares for the stranger and who comes to us as a stranger, reminding us over and over again that while he is with us he does not belong to us. In the church, we are dared to believe that it is God who makes us a community and not we ourselves, and that our differences are God's best tools for opening us up to the truth that is bigger than we are.





Welcome to a world then, in which God is free: to heal, restore, and include whomever God wants to, whether we agree, want, like it or not. Welcome to a world that gives sight to the blind and liberty to captives. Welcome to a world that abolishes ancient vengeance. Welcome to a world that unites us and makes us one in our care for all who suffer in this world; welcome to a world where we are called to confront injustice, poverty and oppression wherever it is found, whether that be in the broken streets of Haiti or in the home of our next door neighbor. Welcome to the world of the good news of Jesus Christ. Let us pray:

Liberator Christ,  
you came into a holy place  
and read the sacred word  
about sight for blind folk and freedom for prisoners.  
Come to this place now.  
Read these words to us  
until our own eyes are opened, our faith is unlocked,  
and we can see the world as it is, and as it could be;  
[until the yearnings of ordinary people are taken seriously,  
and the visions of the young are valued,  
and the potential of the old is released;  
until your kingdom is celebrated everywhere,  
and your church is good news to the poor.  
Amen.

From Iona Abbey Worship Book, 2001, p 157

