

Third Sunday after Epiphany

Although we cannot see it on our bulletins, one feature of this morning's pericope from Saint Luke is really quite strange. Jesus says to the synagogue worshipers in Nazareth: "*Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself; what we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here also in your own country.'*"

What makes this passage odd is that in Luke's Gospel no visit to Capernaum has yet been mentioned by Luke, no action there by Christ yet recorded. Luke presents today's narrative as the first such account following our Lord's testing in the wilderness, yet in this account Jesus mentions what he has done in Capernaum. In the opening dedication of his gospel Luke promises Theophilus that he will *write* for him *an orderly account*, yet right away we might question his ability to compose a proper sequence of events.

But of course the author knows exactly what he is doing; he has just opened his telling of Christ's ministry with a presentation of the entire Gospel *in nuce*, "in a nutshell." Christ comes among his people, he promises salvation but they reject him. Blind to his messianic glory and convinced that he is a dangerous fool, they seize hold of him to kill him. At this moment we are in Nazareth on a Sabbath day, and as the Son of God he renders them powerless and escapes. But eighteen chapters down the road the scene is Gethsemane on a Thursday night, he crowd will come with swords and clubs, and this time he will let them have their way. Saint Luke the Evangelist, therefore, has just given us a fine example of dramatic foreshadowing.

It is the people's contempt for Christ, however, that he most wishes us to notice. It is the great irony of the Gospel that the very thing we for which we praise God throughout the Christmas cycle – coming to us in the lowly form of a man – is the congregation's (indeed, the world's) ground for rejecting him. For the Word to be made flesh, he must have not only a human mother but a local address, he must have neighbors who see him every day. Physically, noting about Jesus told those neighbors, "This man is the one who will redeem Israel. But because *he had no form or comeliness that people should look at him, and no beauty that his fellow Jews should desire him*, in the end *he was despised and rejected*. John begins his Gospel in much the same way as Luke, but with a single statement:

He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

They wanted something more powerful and Messiah-like. They demanded wondrous proof. If God is to come among us as a man, then at least he should be some kind of "divine man"

– the kind of man who looks superior, does everything better, who can walk through fire without being harmed, who can be attacked with swords but cannot die.

Yet, what does Jesus prove to be, and who is the only Savior we have to proclaim? He is, indeed, a *man of sorrows* who in the end appears more stricken and helpless than anyone he ever healed. He turns out to be truly human, as much a man of flesh and blood as you or I, man who when you cut him, does bleed; and who, when you crucify him, dies and lies cold in his grave.

It once occurred to Martin Luther that the way Jesus was rejected because of his lowly human nature, so the Word of God down through the ages has been attacked by God's enemies on similar grounds. The residents of Nazareth knew that Christ was born of Mary, and had grown up in the household of Joseph. Therefore, in their great wisdom they expressed their conclusion about him, their judgement of him, with this rhetorical question:

“Is not this Joseph's son?”

Now, any seven year-old child raised in the church knows the answer to this: “No, he is not.” For the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was born of woman does not prove he was born of man. Yes, the truth of where he came from is impossible in human terms, impossible in the eyes of the world. But that is her very point of his incarnation.

Likewise, the Holy Scriptures have come down to us filled with human features that make them look like any other ancient literature. It is also possible – indeed, quite logical for the human mind – to conclude that if they come to us made out of human words, their statements written not only in the style but often reflecting the thought-world of their human authors, they express no more than those men's minds. In fact, when some of the early Christians compared the Bible to the fine classical literature in which they had been schooled, the crude nature of Holy Scripture and its often less-than-elegant phrasing sometimes embarrassed them. They did not always know how to answer when their opponents would argue, “If your Scriptures are divine revelation, why is their style not more sublime?”

When Missouri Synod leaders were engaged in battles over Biblical studies, it was hoped that Martin Franzmann, as a revered New Testament scholar who had taught in St. Louis for twenty-three years, would agree to return from England and help them find a way out of their quarrel. Obediently he flew in, stood up, and read to his audience lines from Sonnet 130 by William Shakespeare, in which a man speaks of looking upon his wife of many years:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; / Coral is far more red than her lips' red;

*If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun; / If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white, / But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight / Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know / That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go; / My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.*

Then the final couplet:

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare / As any she belied with false compare.

Who but Franzmann would have chosen that for a conference on the nature and authority of the Holy Scriptures? But whatever human qualities make one section of the Bible or another great literature in the world's eyes, in the end the real beauty of the Scriptures is fully known only to those who love Jesus Christ, and who cling for life to the golden thread of God's saving grace that defines the tapestry of its many and diverse books. Those who stand back in the position of judges, believing they can decide for themselves, are like the Nazarene's who saw in Jesus one they deemed merely to be "Joseph's son." Pretending to be objective and rational, they will always refuse to submit to the authority of the Scriptures as God's holy Word.

So as it went with the Word Made Flesh, so it goes with the Scriptures that testify to him – and so also does it go with his holy church. What would be the verdict if the church herself, the Bride of Christ, were to be judged by the behavior of its human occupants? What if the glory of the church were determined by the human integrity with which its clergy and its laity alike carried out their calling? Here, too, the doctrine of the two natures of Christ can help us understand how it even remains possible for us to sing hymns on the splendor of the church, or to sing our love for her.

What is so painful here is that the church not only has a human physicality about it – plumbing to be fixed, books that wear out, finances to track – but that God places all these things in the hands of sinners. The world loves nothing better than to take a stab at God by finding fault with ministers and churches, yet it also seems that we never tire of furnishing them with material. We don't normally invite guests over for dinner and then say, "Please don't look at the house," but often it is, "Please join our congregation, but don't look too closely."

Thank God we can celebrate and use, point any visitor to, those things of God that are more beautiful than any human ugliness, more wondrous than our human behavior is predictable. We keep kneeling together in confession of our sins; sitting together in this place to receive the power of God's Word that both cuts and heals us; standing together to confess

our saving God in both Creed and hymn of praise; and again kneeling together to feast at a royal banquet most undeserved.

With this gladness and threefold confidence we live under Christ: We confess his divine glory as the Savior of the world, submit ourselves to the unique and supreme authority of the Scriptures to which he is the Key, and love and serve in the Church whose only glory is that of him who died for her. ✠