

Let us pray: Jesus, when you speak truths so very distant from anything we have known; when you send us to places that make us shudder, please help us. Take our smugness and our desire for comfort, and overcome them with your love. Help us to neither run from you, nor push you away from ourselves. Help us instead to hold fast within your loving embrace and open our own arms to those we mistake as strangers, not recognizing that it is you who comes to us in need. *Amen.*<sup>1</sup>

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During this season of Epiphany we call to mind the ways in which Jesus was ‘shown forth’ or ‘made manifest’ following his birth. On the Feast Day of the Epiphany we remember the visit of the Magi. Those astrologers from modern-day Iran who traveled to Israel where they encountered the baby Jesus. With no offense meant to Jesus – but as a baby, he was a bit of a by-stander in that drama. It was more about someone else, in this case the Wise Men, who announced the epiphany.

The first Sunday after the visit of the three Kings we remembered the Baptism of Jesus, another epiphany. And here again, someone else is the principal actor. At the Baptism of Jesus it is the voice of God who declared the divinity of Jesus.

During Epiphany we have also seen Jesus being shown forth when the Gospel of John recounts that first miracle of turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. Here again, with no intention to slight our Savior, Jesus is portrayed as an almost uninterested and unwilling actor in that scene. It is his mother who tells Jesus to get busy with a miracle, so they wouldn’t run out of wine.

Jesus demurs, reminding his mother that it isn’t yet time for his ministry to begin. You can almost see Mary patting Jesus on the head and clucking her tongue, as she tells the servants, *You just go ahead and do whatever he says. He’s such a good boy.*

And you can almost see Jesus roll his eyes as he obeys his mother: *Okay, fill up those jugs over there with water and then give some to the maitre’d.* In this epiphany, once again it was more about someone else, in this case the servants and the disciples, who witnessed an epiphany.

Announced by the Magi.

Declared by God at his baptism.

Witnessed by the disciples and some waiters at a wedding.

But so far – we haven’t seen or heard Jesus himself taking center stage, announcing his own agenda, declaring that God was now present with us. Until today.

Jesus arrives in his hometown of Nazareth, and like the observant Jew that he was his entire life, he comes to the synagogue on the Sabbath. At this point, all that his hometown crowd

knows about Jesus is that he had grown up there since the time he was a baby. His parents were Mary and Joseph – although there were always some raised eyebrows and discreet coughs when that subject came up. And Luke tells us that after his Baptism Jesus had developed a bit of a reputation as a teacher. So you can image the bright eyes and attentive ears that greeted Jesus when he returned to his home synagogue.

We don't know enough about 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism, to know how it was the Jesus read those verses from Isaiah. Some scholars think that by this time, synagogue worship throughout the countryside had matured to the extent that a lectionary was in place. Taking that point, there would have been an assigned reading for the day, and reading from Isaiah happened to be it. Other scholars aren't so sure. They wonder if perhaps things weren't quite so organized out in the countryside, and that maybe Jesus was able to pick his own reading. Whatever the case, it was a doozy. Jesus read several scriptures from Isaiah, one of the great prophets from Jewish history.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release  
to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the  
oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

The folk in the synagogue no doubt looked around at each other and thought:

*Well, that's a nice little reading, as far as it goes. Everyone likes good old Isaiah. When things are getting rough, whenever the crops fail; whenever the Romans are being especially obnoxious in the occupation; you can always count on Isaiah to give us a story about how it's all going to be better at the end of the ages. All we have to do is just hang on, just keep dreaming about that 'pie in the sky' that we're all going to get a piece of someday.*

*And wasn't that clever of Mary and Joseph's boy to read that lesson. Doesn't he have a good voice? Well, they say to themselves, let's see how he wraps this service up, and get ready for another day of being hungry and another day of trying to avoid the Romans.*

With that reading from Isaiah and the short sermon that followed – all of nine words – we come at last to an Epiphany where Jesus writes the script, Jesus directs the action, and Jesus is the actor.

The folk gathered in the synagogue all looked at Jesus. He looks back at them and says:

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Jesus tells the crowd in his hometown synagogue that God is now – today – doing justice. Jesus has now set the stage on his own terms. He establishes the tone and style for everything that is going to follow.

There is good news for the poor, today.  
There is release for those in captivity, today.  
There is sight for those who are blind, today.  
There is freedom for the oppressed, today.

That's the message of Jesus: *today*.

There's a cost associated with a message like that. There is always a consequence when someone decides to *do justice* rather than just *love justice*. Even when the 'somebody' with the message, is God.

Even on this first day of a recorded message from Jesus in Luke's Gospel, Jesus is on his way to the cross.

Jesus hasn't healed anyone yet – we'll get those stories later. Simon and his brothers have not yet caught their boat-sinking, net-breaking load of fish – we'll hear about that in a week or two. Neither the Compassionate Samaritan nor the Compassionate Father with his two ornery sons are yet on the scene. No Pharisees have been put in their place, and no Scribes have been silenced.

Nevertheless, in his own hometown, delivering God's message that salvation will come even to the Gentiles and to military and diplomatic enemies, Jesus began to see the cost of doing justice.

Jesus reminded the people of Nazareth that Elisha had brought God's healing to an enemy – a Syrian, of all things – suffering with leprosy, and went on to point out that no Israelite suffering from leprosy at the same time had been cured.

Jesus reminded the people of Nazareth that Elijah had brought God's miracle of abundant food to a Gentile woman and her family who were starving, and went on to remind them that all of Israel had been starving at the same time, with no miracle from God.

Well, the people in Nazareth had heard enough. They didn't care who son he was, or how well he could read from the old scrolls. He was not going to talk to them like that, so they tried to throw him off a cliff.

There is always a consequence when someone decides to *do justice* rather than just *love justice*. Even when the ‘somebody’ with the message, is God.

There *is* good news for the poor, today.  
There *is* release for those in captivity, today.  
There *is* sight for those who are blind, today.  
There *is* freedom for the oppressed, today.

That’s the message of Jesus: *today*.

Not someday. Today.

We are called to live our lives in community mindful of God’s *today*. Organized religion is always too ready to trip over itself and fall straight into the trap of thinking that God operates in terms of ‘someday’. I don’t think that *someday* is even found in the vocabulary of God.

The message of Jesus to the people of Nazareth, to the people who lived in the Galilee, to the people who lived in Jerusalem and Judea, was that God was calling them to do justice – today. That same message is alive for us – today.

Verna Dozier said that the great failing of the church was when we decided to start worshipping Jesus, and to stop following him.<sup>ii</sup> If Verna’s right, if the church did stop following Jesus back in the days of Constantine the Great, let that not be said of us, today.

Jesus calls us to follow him.  
Jesus calls us to follow him in doing justice.  
Jesus calls us to follow him to the cross.

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<sup>i</sup> After ‘Praying the Text’ as published by The Center for Liturgy at Saint Louis University.

<sup>ii</sup> Dozier, Verna. *The Dream of God*.