

Reading the Bible with Jesus in the “Year of Evangelization”

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[1] Before starting my presentation, I would like to express my gratitude to the Archdiocese of Dublin and to the Faculty of Theology of St. Patrick’s College for their invitation to participate in this conference. Being here with you today is a great honour for me.

For many years I had been fortunate to work at the “Casa de la Biblia” in Madrid. “Casa de la Biblia” means “House of the Bible”. It is an institution dedicated to promoting biblical pastoral work in Spain. Since then I have been able to share with many individuals and groups the living dialogue that takes place in the encounter with the Scriptures. That experience persuaded me of the truth in what the prophet Isaiah says about the action of God’s Word:

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purposed, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” (Is 55:10-11)

The experience of reading the Bible in group that I have been lucky enough to enjoy so many times has been, and continues to be a blessing for me.

[2] Throughout this year, the Archdiocese of Dublin has proposed to the parishes and communities the celebration of a “Year of Evangelization”, and this proposal has been supported by the Church of Ireland. A major programme within this celebration is the suggestion of reading the Gospel of Luke following the steps of the *Lectio Divina*. This presentation is part

of this initiative, and is intended to promote and to encourage this way of reading the Bible. In this framework I would like to talk about how reading the Bible can help us in the mission of proclaiming the Good News. And I will do it by focusing in a passage of the Gospel of Luke in which Jesus himself finds in the Scriptures the clues for his own mission.

In the Gospels we often see Jesus interpreting the Scriptures of Israel, but in the Gospel of Luke his personal relationship with them is closer and more intimate. In this Gospel, in fact, Jesus turns to Scripture in order to explain the main characteristics of his mission, and to reveal the meaning of his death and resurrection. There are two passages, found only in Luke, in which this can be seen more clearly.

The first, situated at the beginning of his public activity, summarizes what Jesus is going to do during his ministry (Luke 4:16-30). It takes place in Nazareth, the town where he had been raised. Jesus finds a passage from the prophet Isaiah, and declares that it has been fulfilled while they were listening. The text of Isaiah talks about the mission of God's anointed prophet, with whom Jesus identifies himself.

The second passage is located towards the end of the Gospel. In it, the Risen Jesus joins two of his former disciples on their way to Emmaus. They are returning home, perplexed by the events of the Passion. Jesus invites them to consider what the Scriptures say about him. Later in the story they will comment: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32). Thanks to the Scriptures, explained by Jesus, these disciples were able to start a process that led them to a full encounter with him.

In these two passages, Jesus refers to the Scripture to explain something about himself. It is something that is not easy to discover at first sight, something that only can be grasped through them. In the first passage, the Scriptures are the clue to understanding the mission that Jesus is going to fulfill during his public ministry. In the second, reading them is the first stage in recognizing the Risen Jesus. Today we are going to concentrate on the first passage in order to learn from Jesus how reading the word of God can help us in this "Year of Evangelization".

[3] The episode of Nazareth enjoys pride of place in the Gospel of Luke. It is located in the very moment in which Jesus begins his public activity. In the preceding chapters, the evangelist has reported several episodes of Jesus' life: his childhood, his baptism and his temptations. In his view, all these events belong in the first part of the life of Jesus which concentrates on the "noble origins" of the protagonist. The episode of Nazareth is the first one of his public ministry, and Luke invites his readers to pay close attention to it.

Luke knows that the public activity of Jesus had already begun, and for that reason he introduces this episode with a summary in which he tells his readers that Jesus "returned to Galilee... and began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone" (Luke 4:14-15). In spite of that, this is the first event in Jesus' public life that he narrates in detail. In order to understand the meaning of this choice it is useful to know where this story comes from, and why Luke has placed it at this precise point of his narrative.

Most probably, Luke found this tradition in the Gospel of Mark. Nevertheless in that Gospel it is not placed at the beginning of Jesus' public activity, but much later (Mark 6:1-6). This is very striking, because Luke follows very closely the order of Mark's narrative. It seems that Luke might have been interested in locating this episode just at the precise moment in which Jesus was about to begin his public ministry. Luke's interest in this episode is also made evident in the fact that he has enlarged it, adding many details to the Markan story. Prominent among these additions are the lengthy Scripture quotations from the prophet Isaiah, and the recollection of two episodes told in the Old Testament about the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

The extensive modification of the Markan story shows that Luke was anxious to bring out its special meaning. He moved it to the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus and added new details because he wanted to present it as a "programmatically story". In fact, this story, as it is told by Luke, prefigures and anticipates the whole ministry of Jesus, and gives to his mission a precise meaning.

Moreover, from the perspective of Luke, this episode not only prefigures the mission of Jesus, it also anticipates the mission of his

followers after his death. The author of the Gospel of Luke, as you probably know, wrote also the Acts of the Apostles, where his disciples continue the mission initiated by him. We can say that in this passage it is not only the mission of Jesus that is prefigured, but also that of the Church after him.

In the book of the Acts there is, in fact, a story that recalls the episode of Nazareth: Paul and Barnabas, in Paul's first missionary trip, come to Antioch of Pisidia. They enter the synagogue, as Jesus did in Nazareth, and Paul preaches the good news showing that his message was in accordance with the Scriptures. And, as happened to Jesus, they also meet the rejection of the people gathered in the synagogue (Acts 13:13-52). By telling a story so similar to the one told about Jesus, Luke wants to remind his readers that the early church was continuing the mission initiated by Jesus.

We may conclude, then, that the episode of Nazareth not only prefigures the mission of Jesus, but also that of his disciples after his death. What we have in this passage is a programme for evangelization. I invite you to read this passage from this perspective. We all have read it or listened to it many times, I am sure, but let us read it trying to discover how the attentive reading of the Scriptures can help us during this year of evangelization. The story goes like this:

When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*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 favour.*

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, Doctor, cure yourself! And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’”

And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

[4] The first thing that demands our attention in this episode is the importance given to the references to the Scripture. Mark and Matthew both narrate the same episode, but they do not link the visit of Jesus to Nazareth with any proclamation of the Scriptures. This is a feature proper to Luke who quotes a long passage taken from the book of the prophet Isaiah and makes reference to two episodes of the lives of Elijah and Elisha narrated in all detail in the books of Kings (1 Kings 17:9-24; 2 K 5:1-19)

In Luke’s view, these passages help in understanding the meaning of Jesus’ mission. But in order to appreciate this, we need to read them as Jesus did.

His very short commentary to the passage of Isaiah allows us to understand the clue to the way he reads the Bible: “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled”. It is a reading that does not relegate to the past the prophetic announcements or the episodes of salvation history, but finds in them a message for our time. This is the most important difference between

reading the Bible as a historical document and reading the Bible as a testimony of faith. By relating what was said and actually happened at that time with the “today” of the reader, the dead letter becomes a living word.

This way of interpreting the Scriptures is also used constantly in the Acts of the Apostles. Luke presents Jesus’ first disciples as searching for light in order to understand the new experiences they were living. The incident that comes after the deliverance of Peter is very eloquent in this respect.

The community had gathered to pray, looking for an answer to the persecution to which they were being submitted. In their prayer they recited *Psalms 2* that gives voice to what they are going through: “Why did the Gentiles rage and the peoples imagine vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.” In their prayer they find that the words of the Psalm are talking about Jesus and about what they are going through: “For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your plan had predestined to take place.” (Acts 4:25-28; cf. Psalm 2:1-2). For the disciples of Jesus, as well as for Jesus himself, the Scriptures are not only talking about past times, they also have a message for the present time.

In the Nazareth episode Jesus describes the relationship between the oracles of the past and the present situation in terms of fulfillment: “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled”. This statement implies that the promise contained in the oracles has been made a reality in Jesus. The same conviction is apparent in the conversation with the disciples of Emmaus, where Jesus interprets to them the sayings about himself in all the Scriptures “beginning with Moses and all the prophets” (Luke 24:27).

In the same way, in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, those that are preaching the good news are doing it with the conviction that the Scriptures have been fulfilled in Jesus. Peter, in his speeches, continuously quotes the pronouncements of the prophets and the words of the Psalms in order to show that “all the prophets, as many as have spoken, from Samuel and those after him, predicted these days” (Acts 3:24), and Paul does the same

when he asserts that he has given testimony about Jesus “saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place” (Acts 26:22).

In this context especially eloquent is the story of the encounter of Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch who was returning to his homeland after worshipping God in Jerusalem. Philip, under the influence of the Spirit, came close his chariot and a dialogue took place between the two of them in which Jesus is presented as the key to understanding the Scriptures (Acts 8:30-35):

Philip asks: Do you understand what you are reading?

The eunuch answers: How can I, unless someone guides me?

Then the eunuch invites Philip to get in the chariot and sit beside him. The passage that he was reading was from the prophet Isaiah: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter...”

The eunuch asks Philip: About whom does the prophet say this, about himself, or about someone else?

And Philip, starting with this Scripture, proclaims to him the good news about Jesus.

Philip interprets the Scriptures showing that the prophetic oracles are pointing to Jesus. The conviction that is made clear in these passages is that Jesus is the clue to comprehend the true and the most profound message of the Scriptures.

All these references in the Gospel of Luke and in the Acts of the Apostles are showing that the episode of Nazareth is a model for the Christian way of reading the Bible. In fact, in this passage we find two basic features that characterize such a reading. The first is that the biblical texts and examples of the Scriptures are not to be read only as sayings about the past, but as words that have a message for today. In the Christian community the words of the Scripture belong to a living tradition where the faithful is encouraged to continue the dialogue. The second feature is that Jesus is the key to really understanding the words and the experiences of that living tradition: his life, his teaching and above all his death and resurrection. The Scriptures have been fulfilled in him, and that is why they are a living word for us.

[5] I have spent time in exploring the way of reading the Scriptures that is made evident in the episode at Nazareth, because for Luke it is the key to understanding the mission of Jesus. In it, we can also find some guidelines for our mission as evangelizers.

The programmatic character of this passage can be seen in the fact that the main features of Jesus' mission sketched in it are then subsequently displayed in the remainder of the Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles. Four features can be identified:

1. Jesus is presented as the Anointed Prophet. It is because he has been anointed by the Spirit of God that he has the authority and the power to accomplish his mission. His disciples will continue this same mission because they have received the Holy Spirit. We can say then that the Spirit has a leading role in Evangelization.
2. To evangelize is to proclaim the good news in words and in deeds. It brings forth liberation and salvation. Luke places this announcement in the frame of the "year of the Lord's favour", which refers, most probably, to the biblical jubilee. This good news of salvation is also the message proclaimed by his disciples according to the Acts of the Apostles.
3. The good news proclaimed by Jesus and his disciples is addressed, in the first place, to the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed. But it is also proclaimed to the pagans and foreigners, and among them to the most marginalized.
4. More often than not, those who proclaim the good news have to face rejection and persecution. The rejection of Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth anticipates the confrontation that he and his disciples will suffer as they proclaim the good news.

We can now consider each one of these four features of evangelization as they appear in the Gospel of Luke and in the Acts of the Apostles, adding some suggestions for our own time

[6] The first trait of the programme outlined by Luke in this episode is that the Spirit plays a key role in evangelization. By presenting Jesus as the Anointed Prophet, Luke is suggesting that the Spirit has a leading role in

Evangelization. The Spirit, in fact, is a major character in the Gospel of Luke. In the infancy narrative his action is made visible in almost every event. But it is in the ministry of Jesus where he plays a key role. He descends upon Jesus after his baptism (Luke 3:22), and he guides him into the wilderness in order to be tempted (Luke 4:1, 14). In the Gospel of Luke the whole ministry of Jesus is governed by the Spirit. For this reason, Luke states that after the temptations, just when Jesus is about to begin his public ministry, the devil “departed from him until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13). He returns only when he enters [into] Judas at the beginning of the passion narrative (Luke 22:3).

In the book of Acts the Spirit leads the mission of the apostles. His descent upon the disciples at Pentecost is an episode in some ways parallel to the baptism of Jesus (Acts 2:1-4). The disciples, filled with this Spirit, begin to proclaim the good news. It is the Spirit who leads, and confirms the progress of the gospel by coming upon those who listen to the good news proclaimed by the apostles, as it happens with the Samaritans, with Cornelius and his friends, or with the disciples of Ephesus met by Paul (Acts 8:14-17; 10:40-48; 15:28; 19:1-7). The most important qualifications of the messengers of the Gospel are not human qualities, such as eloquence or wisdom, but the fact that they are filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:8; 6:3, 5; 7:55; 9:17; 11:24; 13:9).

This way of understanding evangelization is inviting us to reflect on our efforts as evangelizers. As disciples of Jesus, we are all called to actively participate in the task of evangelization; but we cannot forget that our mission should be carried out in obedience to the Holy Spirit. He is the one who shows us the way and guides us and encourages us, the one who enlivens the announcing of the Gospel. We will be messengers of this good news only if we are anointed by the Holy Spirit, as were the first disciples.

[7] The second feature of the programme of evangelization outlined in the Nazareth episode is about the contents of the message. According to the quotation from Isaiah, the message is described as good news of liberation. It is about “bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18; cf. Isaiah 61:1-2) The announcement from Isaiah calls to

mind the celebration of the jubilee to which Luke makes reference by saying that Jesus' mission will consist in "proclaiming the year of the Lord" (Luke 4:19; Isaiah 58:6).

This is why, all through the Gospel, the message proclaimed by Jesus in word and in deeds is primarily the good news of liberation (Luke 4:43; 7:22; 8:1). The contents of this good news become evident in an eloquent way in the deeds he performs: healings, exorcisms, reception of the emarginated, etc. This mission may be summed up in the passage of the encounter with Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). Jesus, after entering Zacchaeus's house and listening to his words of repentance declares: "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:9).

In the book of Acts of the Apostles, the disciples also announce good news (Acts 5:42; 8:25; 10:36, etc.) But now the good news is Jesus himself, in whose death and resurrection God's promises have been fulfilled. In the speeches delivered by different characters the message is always the same: Jesus is risen, and has brought us salvation! (Acts 2:16; 3:18-24). The apostles joyfully and courageously confess "there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by whom we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The Risen one is the fulfillment of this salvation (Acts 2:23-31).

This feature of the evangelization carried out by Jesus and his first disciples is inviting us to reflect on the contents of our announcement, and to ask ourselves whether or not we are truly announcing good news. Everybody is willing to hear good news. Everybody is ready to welcome a message that talks about liberation and salvation, because that is the strongest desire of every human being. Now Jesus Christ is that good news that we have to announce not only with words but also in deeds.

[8] The third feature of the evangelization programme is about those to whom the Gospel should be addressed. This feature is strongly emphasized in the episode of Nazareth because it was very important for the first Christians. Some of them thought that in order to be disciples of Jesus it was necessary, to some extent, to become Jewish and to observe the Law of Moses. This is why, when Jesus mentions that Elijah had been sent by God to a Phoenician widow, and that Elisha had cured a Syrian general, those that were listening were enraged at him. But Luke says that the year of

grace is for all, starting with those most in need of that good news: the poor, those deprived of freedom, the blind... and those that are far away.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus speaks specially to the marginalized: lepers (Lk 5:12-16), paralytics (Luke 5:17-26), pagans (Luke 7:1-10), those termed 'sinners' (Luke 7:36-50). His attachment to sinners was an important reason for his being criticized and for opposition to him (Luke 15:1-2); some of his parables, like that of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, or the better known Prodigal Son, are trying to explain that Jesus' way of behaving was making the mercy of God manifest (Luke 15:4-32). In the words and deeds of Jesus we can see the year of grace of the Lord, that is, the time when the salvation is made manifest for all.

In the book of Acts, his disciples continue the same mission, announcing the Gospel to those who are far away, to the pagans. Luke presents the openness of the Gospel to the pagans as the work of the Spirit, who always ensures the spreading of the good news among them. This can be seen, for instance, in the episode when Peter visits the house of Cornelius: the Spirit comes down on all the members of the family (Acts 10:1-11:18).

This third feature is inviting us to reflect about who are the preferred addressees of our evangelization. We need to ask ourselves: "For whom can the message of Jesus be good news? How can we announce a year of grace in this time of crisis, when many individuals and families are in need? A good example of how to announce the gospel to those who are far off is the invitation that Archbishop Martin has made to the young in a new language and with a new horizon.

[9] Finally, in the Nazareth scene we can recognize that very often one of the reactions that follow the announcement of the gospel is rejection and persecution. Those who are listening to Jesus are surprised to see that "the son of Joseph" is applying the words of Isaiah to himself. They seem to be asking themselves: "How can he be telling us that the Spirit has anointed him and given him the commission to announce the Lord's year of grace? Jesus answers them quoting the proverb about the prophet who is not accepted in his own country, and brings to their memory the stories of Elijah and Elisha to show them that the gospel is for all. The reaction of the

people from his own town, who try to put him to death, is followed by many other similar reactions that will reach their climax at the time of the passion.

Criticism, rejection and open persecution are present at all times during the mission of Jesus. Some people will judge him (Luke 7:39), others will criticize him openly (Luke 15:1-2); others begin to conspire against him (Luke 6:11); others, finally, begin to plan his death in alliance with one of his disciples (Luke 22:1-3) and carry out their plan (Luke 22-23). The announcement of the good news often meets with rejection because it means trouble for the established order. This explains why Jesus' death – his destiny- is present throughout his mission.

The first Christians also experienced how rejection and persecution follow in the wake of the proclamation of the gospel. In Acts we read how Peter and John were put in jail for preaching the good news (Acts 4:1–22); the apostles, after having been imprisoned and liberated, had to appear before the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:7–42); Stephen was put to death for bearing witness to Jesus (Acts 7:54–60); the Hellenists had to flee from Jerusalem because they were persecuted (Acts 8:1; 11:19); James was beheaded and Peter was incarcerated again in the wake of a new persecution (Acts 12:1–4). Paul, too, on many occasions had to put up not only with opposition (Acts 3:44–45) but also with outright persecution (Acts 3:50; 4:5–6).

Persecution for the sake of the gospel was a constant feature of the life of Jesus and of the first Christians, and it has continued to be all through the history of the Church. Even in our days, Christians are persecuted in many parts of the world for bearing witness to their faith. There are also subtle ways of opposing the advance of the gospel: for example, propaganda that triggers “moral panic” in society and ascribes a negative label to the Church and its activities. As Christians we should not forget that we are disciples of the crucified one.

[10] After considering how these four features of Jesus' programme of evangelization come to pass and are to be seen in his actions and in those of his disciples, we are in a better position to understand why Luke attached such importance to the Nazareth episode, and placed it at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. This episode not only describes Jesus' first act in his public

life, it also describes—before they unfold—the basic features of his mission and of the mission that his disciples will carry out after him. Furthermore, in this episode the basic characteristics of evangelization are outlined. Luke and the Christians to whom he addressed his Gospel understood all this in the light of the Scriptures. Thus the narrative of the episode is both a recollection of a past experience and a model for future work of evangelization.

This was the model that Luke the Evangelist put before his community, people of the third Christian generation, who in all probability had lost the zeal for evangelization so prominent in the first two Christian generations. He was inviting his community to question themselves, to reflect upon their situation and to follow the example of Jesus and his first disciples. This invitation of Luke is addressed to us also, since our most important mission as Christians is to continue proclaiming the good news that was announced by Jesus.

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