

GROWING Together

11th Series

ON READING OUR BIBLE – II

Last year we introduced our readers to a way of understanding the Bible. Consistent with the Hebrew way of seeing life as an ongoing dialogue with God's word, we outlined how after an event occurred, four things happen:

#1 – the story is told and retold;

#2 – circumstances prompt the writing down of the story;

#3 – the passage is read and interpreted in the light of the experience and faith of the Church;

#4 – but the possibility always remains that a new meaning is still to be realized or discovered.

In other words, the Bible is full of stories about stories. The Hebrew word for such stories about the stories in the Bible is **midrashim**. For Christians, many of the gospel narratives could be described as **midrashim**.

One of the gospel narratives we hear these Sundays is the story of Jesus' visit to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:14ff). We learn that Jesus read from Isaiah 61: "The Lord's Spirit has come to me, because he has chosen me to tell the good news to the poor. The Lord has sent me to announce freedom for prisoners, to give sight to the blind, to free everyone who suffers, and to say, 'This is the year the Lord has chosen.'" What is going on? Was the scroll already opened to Isaiah 61 because it was the lection or reading for that day? Was Jesus using this text to state his platform for messiahship, now having just experienced his temptations? Or is Jesus' life, death, and resurrection being understood by early Christians as a story about that text of Isaiah 61?

We now read Luke 4:14ff, thinking of the Servant passages of Isaiah, including chapter 61.

#1 – Someone has died, either famous (Moses, a prophet, a king) or obscure. The individual is seen as the Servant of the Lord.

#2 – In a time of crisis during or after the Babylonian Exile, this story is written in poetic form, the Servant's death being seen as unjust (Isa. 53).

Messianic qualities are attributed to this Servant by whose unjust death other people receive life. The Servant brings "good news to the poor."

#3 – The followers of Jesus and the early Church see Jesus as the incarnation of this Servant. For this reason we are told about the Ethiopian official in Acts 8:34 who, after reading from the book of Isaiah, asks Philip, "Tell me, was the prophet talking about himself or about someone else?"

#4 – Aware that the mission of the Servant described in Luke 4:18-10 is incomplete, the Church then must take the same course of action seen in Isaiah 61. The Church is now the Servant!

Just think of what that mission includes: freedom for prisoners, sight for the blind, deliverance of the oppressed! The clincher is this idea of a Jubilee Year (Isa. 61:2a; Lk. 4:19). Every seventh year was to be a Sabbath, and after seven times seven, the 50th year would be a Jubilee, a time of new beginnings; all debts forgiven, all prisoners set free, truly a new beginning for all people (Leviticus 25).

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Questions for Discussion:

1. *Did Jesus really set prisoners free? How can we say that in Christ's coming the new age, the Jubilee Year, really began?*
2. *What difference does it make whether Jesus identified himself with the servant of the Lord in Isaiah or this was a later interpretation of the Church?*
3. *How do we of the Church continue today the mission of the Servant described in Luke 4:18?*

All scriptural quotations are from the Contemporary English Version

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