

Fall 2006

Good News to the Poor: A Commentary on Lk 4:16-30

Sean Kealy C.S.Sp.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kealy, S. (2006). Good News to the Poor: A Commentary on Lk 4:16-30. *Spiritan Horizons*, 1 (1). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol1/iss1/12>

This Soundings is brought to you for free and open access by Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spiritan Horizons by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR

A commentary on Lk 4: 16-30

Sean Kealy, C.S.Sp.

S. Kealy, an Irish Spiritan, is Professor of Biblical Studies at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, where he also holds the Noble J. Dick Chair in Academic Leadership. He lectured previously at Kenyatta University and St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary, in Nairobi, Kenya, and at Kimmage Mission Institute, Dublin, Ireland. A specialist in the history of interpretation of the Gospels, he is the author of several published books on Scripture and spirituality and numerous scholarly articles. He is currently researching the history of the Markan literature as a follow up to his history of the other three Gospels.

Key questions such as, "Who are the poor?" were on everybody's lips in recent decades.

Evangelizing the "Poor"

Texts like Luke's Nazareth scene (Lk 4:16-30) exploded anew on the Christian stage in the second half of the twentieth century. The "option for the poor" became the most controversial term since Luther's famous slogan "salvation through faith alone". It shook both Protestants and Catholics - and I hope Orthodox - to a profound reflection on their faithfulness to the Gospel of Jesus. For us Spiritans this text of Luke has always been an inspiring one, as is evident from our Rule of Life (SRL 4) where, significantly, the word poor has been surrounded by inverted commas. This text has "flamed out" and spoken to so many Spiritans since it spoke first to Poullart des Places with his chimney sweeps and Libermann with his outreach to Africa. Key questions such as "Who are the poor?" were on everybody's lips in recent decades. Are they the economic poor or is poverty a metaphor for powerlessness and vulnerability? How can the poor be called blessed in any real sense? Is it because they are not blinded by wealth and power and are therefore intoxicated with God? Or is their's a God who will reverse the poverty and oppression so prevalent in our world?

The Broader Context

Clearly we have learned in Scripture studies that we must be attentive to the broader context of biblical books in our examination of individual texts. Thus, even a cursory overview of the material special or unique to Luke shows that he has an extensive pre-occupation with the dangers of wealth, the proper use of possessions and the concern for the poor which should mark a Christian. Scholars like John R. Donahue S.J. (*The Gospel in Parable*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1988, p. 175) highlight some ten texts which Luke has emphasized in his development of the Gospel tradition.

- 1) The infancy narratives have a special interest in the anawim, people lacking money and power. Mary's *Magnificat* praises a God who puts down the mighty from their thrones, fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich away empty (Lk 1:52-53). The offering at the presentation in the Temple is in accordance with the prescriptions for poor people (Lk 2:24).
- 2) John exhorts the one with two coats or with food to share with those who have none (3:16).
- 3) Jesus' public ministry begins not with Mark's *kingdom* (Mk 1:15) but with Jesus quoting Is. 61:1-2, where the Spirit is the father of the poor.

*Only in Luke does Levi
leave everything...*

- 4) Only in Luke does Levi leave everything (Lk 4:17-19; 7:22).
- 5) In Luke only the poor are blessed and there are woes for the rich and powerful (6:20, 24-26)
- 6) Only Luke has the parables of the Rich Fool and Dives and Lazarus (12:13-21; 16:19-31).
- 7) The convert Zacchaeus gives half his goods to the poor (19:8).
- 8) Jesus is the O.T. prophet who sides with the widow (7:11-17; 18:1-8), the stranger (10:29-37; 17:16) and the marginalized (14:12-13, 21).
- 9) The early community shares its goods in common, and there is no needy person among them (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-27)
- 10) In both Gospel and Acts alms-giving is stressed (Lk 11:42; 12:33; 19:8; Acts 10:2,4,31; 24:17).

Luke's Diptych Approach

Luke, like the artists of old, often paints two pictures which together supply the full story. Thus, the activity of the Good Samaritan is balanced by the inactivity of Mary at the feet of Jesus. Likewise, the searching God of the hundred sheep is balanced by the waiting of the Prodigal Father. Luke frequently follows a story of a man with one of a woman. In our section, we have the temptation (what not to do!) scene followed by Jesus showing how to go on mission in the Spirit. The temptations (of the Church in every age!), which draw on Deuteronomy, describe the kind of Messiahship and Church which Jesus rejected and also the kind of Messiahship and Church which Jesus intended – living by God's word, not testing or challenging God but adoring and serving God alone and rejecting comfort and political power-seeking. The first temptation (of the Nazarenes!) teaches that there is more to life than bread, material things and pleasure. The second temptation (often of the older) is to power, social status, and prestige, to be well thought of, to influence people (see the movie *Mass Appeal*). The third temptation (often of the young) is to the quick and spectacular solution, to avoid suffering, personal struggle and responsibility, to shortcut life and suffering, to stress the spectacular, instantaneous solution.

*The key word...is
acceptable.*

Three Questions

The key word in the section, with which the Greek quotation of Isaiah ends, is *acceptable*. It is also used to describe the prophet who is rejected in his own country- he is not *acceptable*. This

term goes back to Leviticus and is used in our regular Eucharist: “Pray that our sacrifice is acceptable to God” (not necessarily to the people).

The Lukan text at Nazareth is, I suggest, an effort to answer **three** questions.

- 1) What does it mean to have the Spirit – to be charismatic?
 - 2) Why did Jesus fail?
 - 3) What did his program for the poor mean?
1. Perhaps the first question is the easiest to answer in words. Jesus is the one who has the Spirit. A sign of the true charismatic is concern for the poor like Jesus. But the Spirit also leads one to and through *failure*.
 2. Jesus failed because he was not content to be acceptable to his audience, even if they were poor, as they evidently thought they were; he sought to be **acceptable to God**. It is easy to imagine Jesus’ (probably) all male congregation as they saw themselves. For they were poor, captives to the Romans, blind like dungeon inmates, oppressed. That God, as in the prophets, would prioritize a poor foreign woman, not to mention the Syrian army commander, was unacceptable. But further, a mission to a foreign woman and above all to the Syrian army commander, who was oppressing Israel and a slave stealer to boot, was clearly out of the question. Jesus does not hesitate to provoke his audience; “*Do here what we heard you did in Capernaum*”. Jesus saw himself as fulfilling their hopes but not their expectations of what God would do for them. To understand this text adequately one must explain why a group of ordinary synagogue-goers became so angry as to try to kill Jesus.
 3. What did Jesus’ program for the poor mean? Probably the best way to answer this question is to examine the **examples** which Luke provides after his Nazareth account. These show in concrete, in the activity of Jesus himself, how he interpreted the programmatic text of Isaiah. They show what the holiness of the Spirit should really mean in action, bringing the good news to the poor, freeing prisoners, giving sight to the blind and helping the downtrodden. Thus, the scenes that follow in Luke are a commentary on and an illustration of his mission to the poor; holding the people spellbound by his authoritative teaching, curing the demoniac, the fever of Simon’s mother-in-law, a variety of diseases, curing Peter of the

A sign of the true charismatic is concern for the poor like Jesus. But the spirit also leads one to and through failure.

fear of his own sinfulness, an excluded leper, a paralyzed man, Levi of his ostracism, etc. Central in this whole section is the teaching in the Sermon on the Plain with its radical command to love enemies. The climax of the scene is in the mission of John's disciples who are referred to the words of Isaiah about the blind, the cripples, the lepers, the deaf, the dead and the poor. Basically Luke's audience is asked: "Are you satisfied with the way Jesus carried out his mission, with the way God is running the world?" This question is far from easy to understand by people with the experience of the Baptist in every age. The fact is that Jesus could have saved or raised the Baptist but he did not.

What is Luke trying to teach?

Recent biblical scholars tend to focus on the hidden agenda of a storyteller like Luke, as he retells a well-known story to his audience.

Ever since Jesus proclaimed his Jubilee vision, the Church with an increasingly sophisticated array of preachers, teachers, and healers, with their hospitals and dispensaries, their universities and schools, has struggled to make this vision a reality.

However, a basic question needs to be asked: Why does Luke begin his account of Jesus' public ministry with such a description of a failing Jesus, despite his excellent preaching, his initially enthusiastic audience whose language, culture and expectations he knows so well? Jesus proclaims the expected Jubilee and ends up rejected, hunted, and an unwelcome person, who has to escape out of town, an obvious embarrassment to his friends and admirers and probably a source of suffering to his mother.

Is Luke warning us not to be afraid to take on our audience as Jesus was not afraid to do? Is he warning the missionaries of his own and every subsequent Christian community that, while we cannot be content with an unjust world and must struggle in the style of Sisyphus for a different world, failure to achieve our ideals and dreams is at the heart of the Christian mission?

*...failure to achieve our
ideals and dreams is at
the heart of the Christian
mission?*

Jesus' mission is one of liberation from the fear of death to a more abundant life, from blindness to seeing with suffering humanity, from a selfish self-centeredness to an attitude of generous giving, from vengeance to forgiveness. But it is also a divisive force. One person's meat is another person's poison. The freedom of our surprising God to work (or not to work) miracles is very difficult for us to understand. Jesus' liberation message of *good news to the*

poor means that the rich will lose something. Freeing slaves and those in prison will seem a threat to all modern Pharaohs, tyrants, jailors, judges and comfortable oligarchies.

Luke is an invitation to trust Jesus and his way of going about his mission.

Luke insists that we must have the vision of Jesus. Yet he seems to be trying to liberate missionaries from the tyranny of results and expectations of instant success, from a numerical Christianity. For Luke, as he portrays Jesus taking on his audience at Nazareth, the temptation is to preach a watered-down message acceptable to one's audience, even if they are poor. Luke is an invitation to trust Jesus and his way of going about his mission. In a sense, he is insisting that, if a person wishes to be a kingdom or Jubilee disciple, one must deny oneself and one's ambitions, take up one's daily cross, as Luke puts it, and follow Jesus.

Let me conclude with the challenging words of Kathy Galloway from the Iona Community in Scotland:

*Do not retreat into your private world,
That place of safety, sheltered from the storm,
Where you may tend your garden, seek your soul,
And rest with loved ones where the fire burns warm.*

*To tend a garden is a precious thing,
But dearer still the one where all may roam,
The weeds of poison, poverty, and war,
Demand your care, who call the earth your home.*

*To seek your soul it is a precious thing,
But you will never find it on your own,
Only among the clamor, threat, and pain
Of other people's need will love be known.*

*To rest with loved ones is a precious thing,
But peace of mind exacts a higher cost,
Your children will not rest and play in quiet,
While they still hear the crying of the lost.*

*Do not retreat into your private world,
There are more ways than firesides to keep warm;
There is no shelter from the rage of life,
So meet its eye, and dance within the storm.*