



'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' (No longer insiders or outsiders; just belonging)

We have departed from the lectionary readings for a while, detouring during August and September through the Gospel of Luke.

Luke appeals especially to a specific demographic of Christian adventurer. His is usually described as being the Gospel for the poor and the marginalised. It often resonates for the outsider. It is peopled by tax collectors and prostitutes, lepers and thieves. Matthew has news of the Great Birth delivered to dignitaries from afar. Luke has it delivered to shepherds around the corner. Luke takes women more seriously than the other Gospels. Matthew writes for the Jews. Mark for the Romans. Luke writes for Gentiles everywhere. He write for us.

In an age when outsiders are finding far more of a voice, Luke is understandably popular with outsider Christians. He feeds into my own interest in this status, this experience, of being an outsider.

And my, it raises some interesting puzzles. For in what way are some people outsiders? Outside what, exactly? And if we are all outsiders, who's left inside? Do the outsiders share a common 'outsider-ness', or are there – as it were – different outsider neighbourhoods, where one set of outsiders are outsiders to other outsiders? Might we rather like the designation outsider (it can, after call, be thought cool)? Maybe we don't want to become insiders?

If we take any puzzle to the grave it is likely to be ourselves. Even prominent New Testament figures found themselves a puzzle. Paul, in the Letter to the Romans, puts it pithily: " For I do not do the good I want, but

the evil I do not want is what I do" [Rom. 7.19].

We moderns might speak of being conflicted. Montaigne described it as being 'double' in himself. The experience of being human is not straightforward, except for those who are unthinking and unchallenged; the comatose. Which is why another central message in the gospels is that of waking up and seeing afresh. It may well be that when we are too much an insider our perceptions cloud a little. Yet feeling an insider is attractive. It assuages our most basic insecurity.

I was recently reminded of one of the ways we employ language to make us feel one of the insiders. Listening to a webcast on strategic planning, I heard people churn out now familiar incantations. We must 'focus on outcomes' and 'drive up efficiency' in order to get into the 'top quartile'. It was vital to be 'proactive, not reactive', to concentrate on 'core business', 'maximise our synergies', keep our eyes on the 'big picture'. Performance data was to be made available on 'score cards'. The highest good, we were told, was to seek 'win/win' situations.

Modern life seems saturated by this kind of clichéd exchange. And it is not confined to the corporate. In personal matters we are enjoined to 'get a life' and 'move on' All this, of course, whilst 'getting in touch with our feelings' and 'giving ourselves some space' though in the contradictory way of clichés, we cannot spend too much time on these, because, as they say, we have to 'get a life' and 'move on'.

I used to be troubled by this kind of clichéd thinking with its ‘always being in control’ sub-plots. Now I am able to take it far less seriously. ‘Been there and done that’ as another cliché would have it. Luckily, I now work in a more enlightened setting. And, personally, I now see that the emperor left for the office this morning without his clothes, and need not be taken so seriously.

Perhaps that is one of the potential gifts of being an outsider: the ability to see things more clearly.

But we’d better be careful, for reasons already hinted at. The human mind can play the game of humility and of being the outsider whilst discreetly revelling in it.

‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ That line from today’s gospel has been teasing me, and I wonder if it has something to say – something below its surface meaning. The surface meaning is clear enough given the context: Jesus attends the synagogue, and as all male members were permitted to do, he reads from and comments on the scriptures. And then, shock, horror, he tells them that he – Jesus – is the fulfilment of the scripture. It soon causes a rumpus. People take offence.

I’d like to ask you to consider this single sentence - ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’ – and see if by using it playfully we might find some bearing on this question of our being an outsider or insider, and the myriad ways in which we handle the things which lead us to adopt first one, then the other stance; indeed, to feel (in some strange way) both things simultaneously.

But first, that question – an insider or outsider – to what? There are many answers: we might feel an outsider by virtue of our lack of money, lack of status; maybe by virtue of our origins. Fundamentally it is about who we are and who we feel ourselves

to be. The list can be a long one. But underlying any circumstantial cause, our feeling an outsider is often something more fundamental. I’d call it existential. Somehow, in our deepest heart, we have the sense of not belonging, of not counting for as much as the next person. And consciously - but far more often unconsciously - we paint over those cracks, bury those disconnections and anxieties, gussy ourselves up and strut the corridors of our lives with the appearance of certitude and confidence. Well, we have to, don’t we? We have to survive.

I wonder if really, at the bottom of all this, is the fear that we have no valued place in the universe. Yet that is what we long for. It might remind you of Augustine’s claim that ‘our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee. O God’. Perhaps that is it: we seek the assurance that we might matter to the maker of this astonishing creation.

‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ What if we understand this to mean something like this truth is only to be discovered by your living it? ‘Scripture’ is meant to be truth. Hearing is a way of perceiving. And what if one approach to addressing our deepest anxiety is to find ever deeper ways of reading the meaning of our experiences, its scripture?

I expect you to think this is a little barmy. Playing with words, you might say. Maybe that’s right. But this is my thinking – that we look outside, to others, for answers and reassurance. If we are lucky – and choose the right people – good people – we find some help. Yet ultimately these weightiest of questions require our own conclusions. And I suspect that we often find them in our own experiences, when we can properly read them. ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

Perhaps you have been flattened by a grief, a tremendous loss, yet in some mysterious way taught by it that you matter. After all, grief is only ever a witness to the depth of our love,

and love (itself a mystery) seems to be its own scripture, its own validating truth. It addresses our outsider-ness.

Perhaps you have been laid low by despair or depression and survived. These things are also scriptures of sorts. They contain some truth. We don't always survive them, of course, but often we do. 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

Perhaps you have simply witnessed heroic human endeavour expressed – as is virtually all heroic human endeavour – in ordinary lives. Not the big screen, but in ordinary human lives. And in doing so have seen glory (to use a religious cliché) and some sensed evidence of an underlying nobility and beauty of which we are a part. Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

I suppose I am thinking aloud. Thinking about this historical Nazarene – the one in whose name we gather here – and seeking to understand how we apprehend what it is he wishes to show us now, in our day.

A week ago today I found myself celebrating the Eucharist in a New York sitting room high in the sky, with two friends whom we had gone to visit. A beautiful couple, together many decades. One, in only the last few months, struck down by a neurological condition. Now without power of speech, unable to move. It was the Feast of the Transfiguration. We had the readings. I longed for our friend to be transfigured, to be healed. I knew it was not to be. It was a heart-breaking visit. Outwardly a scene and circumstance of great sadness. And yet. And yet. Somehow shot through with a greater meaning about what we humans can mean to one another, and the hinted certainty that all this – for all of us – is held together purposefully. Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Amidst the tragedy and loss we felt I could not help but see – simultaneously and concurrently and ultimately beyond any

possible doubt – that we were rendered insiders because of the love we had for one another and had shared over many years. Maybe you can understand that. Maybe your own experiences – the scripture of your life – have shown you the same thing.

And through such complicated and simple things, searing as they can be, we are introduced - sometimes only to the degree we are able to absorb - to God's nature, and to our full membership of the household of faith. We find ourselves taught by the scriptures of our lives. No longer outsiders or insiders. Somehow, just belonging.

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