

The Gospel of Luke, a Theological Application to our Lives

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Bipolar Challenges in the Gospel of Luke

- **Lk 10:38-42. Mary ≠ Martha**
- **Lk 15:11-32. Family Challenge: Strayed Son Returned ≠ Elder Brother**
- **Lk 16:19-31. Lazarus ≠ Rich Man**
- **Lk 16:1-13. “Children of This World” ≠ “Children of the Light”
(Shrewd Administrator)**
- **Lk 19:1-10. Zacchaeus, Before ≠ After**

Luke 04:[14-]21-30, Prelude: Native ≠ and Eternal Interests

²¹ Jesus said to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” ²² All spoke highly of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They asked, “Isn’t this the son of Joseph?” ²³ He said to them, “Surely you will quote me this proverb, ‘Physician, cure yourself,’ and say, ‘Do here in your native place the things that we heard were done in Capernaum.’” ²⁴ He said, “Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his native place. ²⁵ Indeed, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah when the sky was closed for three and a half years, and a severe famine spread over the entire land. ²⁶ It was to none of these that Elijah was sent, but only to a widow in Zarephath in the land of Sidon. ²⁷ Of the many lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha the prophet, not one of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.”

²⁸ When the people in the synagogue heard this, they were all filled with anger. ²⁹ They rose, drove him out of the town, and pressed him to the cliffside on which their town had been built, to throw him down headlong. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went away. (≈ NAB)

Observation

- *Today* [σήμερον]. Cf. exposition in “Christ crucified between two thieves” (*supra*)
 - 2:11, “*Today* [σήμερον] in the town of David a savior has been born to you.”
 - 4:21, “*Today* this scripture has been fulfilled even as you listen.”
 - 19:5, “*Today* I must stay at your home...”
 - 19:9, “*Today* salvation has come to this house.”
 - 22:34, 61, “I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows *today*, you will deny three times that you know me.”
 - 23:43, “*Today* you will be with me in Paradise.”
- “son of Joseph”, 1,27; 2,4.16; 3,23-25

- “Prophet” (in Luke): 7,16.26.39; 9,8.19; 13,33; 24,19 ...
- A widow in Zarephath, in Sidon, the nest of idolatry (where we least expect the miracle of God’s grace. Widow in Luke 2,37; 4,25-26; 7,12; 18,3.5; 20,47; 21,2-3
- the lepers living in the periphery. Leper in Lk 4,27; 7,22; 17,12
- v. 30, “he passed through the midst of them...,” a forecast of the paschal mystery, the death and resurrection

In Benedictine spirituality, two forces vie with one another for precedence and attention, the consciousness of God and eternal value, and the pressing demands and attraction of the secular life, understood as the material, socio-political world we are immersed in, the headline news, fashions, and fads. The Benedictine navigates between two time zones, *kairos* and *kronos*, just as Jesus’ presentation in the synagogue at Nazareth tugged in two directions at once. The people attended the synagogue on the Sabbath for religious motives, but in the presence of Jesus and his incipient celebrity, they were attracted by some immediate advantage that just might fall to them –a miracle or two, some notoriety, a benefaction for the town. Just so, we Benedictines are divided, pulled in two directions at once by sacred and secular interests. “*Through the midst of*” these interests (v. 30), Jesus, and we, negotiate and navigate the tension in our ordinary lives as we approach the Paschal mystery. Saint Benedict counsels us: “Do now what will be of profit for all eternity” (RB prol.44; cf. Mk 8,36).

During a synagogue service, the applause of Jesus’ Nazareth friends tapered off and public opinion veered in the opposite direction. At first, apprised of his rising stardom, the local population gave him a standing ovation. But quickly, when Jesus divulged their secret thoughts, the applause thinned, the offended local population boiled to the point of throwing him over the cliff. What had happened between these polar extremes, admiration of Jesus and the attempt against his life? (This about-face in the crowd’s reaction to Jesus happens time and again in his ministry, and it recurs in our own friendship with Jesus, the dramatic shift from the exultant Palm Sunday “hosanna” to the confused “Crucify him” on Good Friday.) This happens in our spiritual life and search for God, as the monk vacillates between the “*Good Zeal* that separates from evil and leads to God” and the “*Wicked Zeal* of bitterness that separates from God and leads to hell” (RB 72.1).

At first, the Nazareth citizens, proud of their native son, were captivated by his word, when he confirmed that the Isaian prophecy had been fulfilled in their midst. “*He won the approval of all, and they were astonished by the gracious words that came from his lips*” (v. 22). The audience, pickled with pride, recognized him as the son of one of their own, a local craftsman. Is he not one of us, our kin, the son of Joseph, my neighbor? How innocent and effortless the surge

of neighborhood pride, one of our boys attains fame! Now he belongs, not just to one family, but to everybody.

One other detail comes into play. The boy Jesus had been reared in their midst; they knew him, formed him, watched him grow, and identified with him. But, what about the young adult Jesus! (The angel Gabriel appeared to his mother, not to the citizens of Nazareth!) Did Jesus still belong to them? And his growing fame and miracles, might his cousins benefit from his peculiar talent? Such is the case of a political figure or rising “star” in the public eye, when the hometown expects to gather some glitter from his fame and new money. Let’s share the spotlight and market the stardom for ourselves. So, Jesus reads our pretensions: “Surely you will quote me this proverb, ‘Physician, cure yourself,’ and say, ‘Do here in your native place the things that we heard you performed in Capernaum.’”

The reaction of the local population grew more tense once it became clear that Jesus would not accede to their pretensions. He quoted another well-known adage, “*No prophet is accepted in his native place*” (v. 24), what amounted to an insult to his people. The growing dissatisfaction anticipates the tone of Jesus’ ministry; from this point on to the crucifixion, his parables and healings gave off the odor first of acceptance and then rejection. Two worlds in tension.

In his response to the dashed dreams of his townspeople, Jesus cited two precedents, where the beneficiaries of the prophet’s attentions were foreigners, regardless of the vast need in the native country. The prophet Elijah responded not to one of the widows of his homeland but to a widow in Sidon, birthplace of the most famous idolatress, adulteress, in world history, Jezebel. The prophet Elisha cured an outsider, a leper who was not one of the many lepers in Israel, but a Syrian. In the same way, Nazareth has no special privilege or claim over Jesus, who forms the new people of God he will form by his Passover –his sacrifice, death, resurrection, ascension, and gift of the Holy Spirit– in Jerusalem.

The meaning of this incident in the Nazareth synagogue? Jesus left his town to do the work of his Father. His baptism and temptation were his debut, after which he returned home, not to rest on the laurels of budding success, but to be rejected by his own people; from that point on the ties with his native village are cut and he expands his ministry, a man without a country, to all people. In fact, as his mission and the Father’s will becomes clearer, his birthplace becomes a threat. Now Nazareth, and afterwards, Jerusalem, “*did not recognize the time of [her] visitation*” (Lk 19:44), to such a degree –another gospel attests– that Jesus couldn’t work any miracle there, on account of their lack of faith (Mk 6:5).

Jesus' rejection in Nazareth is a preamble to his passion and death in Jerusalem, when once again, his native countrymen and foreign representatives applaud him, only later to reject and crucify him, attempt to erase the trace of God from their midst. On that later occasion, just as in Nazareth when Jesus, on the verge of being hurled over the cliff, passes through the walls of death, and rose from the dead, making Nazareth a dramatic anticipation of the resurrection and ascension, when Jesus will go ahead to prepare a place for us, the best benefit that we his people could hope for from our elder brother Jesus.

Gentle Listeners, This gospel has much to do with us. We, too, sense the tension between God's grandiose plan for salvation and the self-centered and merely provincial interests of Nazareth townfolk, in the human heart a tension exists between the interests of God and the merely secular interests and spectacles. Attractive novelties tarnish the luster of eternity that glows in the human heart. Driven by whim, affections, the distractions of the shopping mall eclipse the light of eternal life, erase the Passover from the roadmap, rob the glory of the resurrection that pertains to everyone without distinction, try to grab the fleeting benefits for oneself, and one's own family of interests. But the resurrection life and the Holy Spirit are not hemmed in by national frontiers; they know of no distinction between foreign and native. God's goodness knows no limits. *This is especially poignant for Luke's multicultural church in Antioch in Syria.*

To be a disciple of Jesus, his kin and contemporary, there's only one valid passport: the faith that Jesus will save us. Every other title, that pretends to annex Jesus to our projects –political party, blood type, reputation for holiness or apostolic zeal and efficiency– every credit card is useless, besides friendship with Jesus and good works that stem from this relationship. Jesus recognizes as his own those of us who, deprived of every other privilege, place ourselves at the mercy of his grace, the measure and font of holiness.

In our reading of the Gospel of Luke, I propose a key for reflecting on our Benedictine lives, "Bipolar Challenges in the Gospel of Luke." What do I mean? Martha and Mary are portrayed, poles apart from one another. Nobody is Martha in her pure, unadulterated state; likewise, nobody is one hundred percent Mary. Each girl represents an orientation in our human and Christian life. The contrast enables us to reflect on our own life. Each person is action and contemplation rolled into one, ora et labora. We have Martha inclinations and Mary tendencies, and at times each of us exhibits a preference for one or the other, but neither exists in her pure state. Another example, the prayer of the Pharisee and the tax collector: they are

exaggerations side by side in the same pew, and together they mirror our lives. Your prayer is somewhere between the two extremes. Let's examine ourselves in the mirror of the gospel, appreciate the tensions and attractions in our own heart.

By way of meditation, identify the poles of attraction in your life, the temporary and the eternal, the impulsive and the permanent. Address the attractions and gratifications that each one offers, the. What draws you most strongly? What holds you back from moving in one direction or the other?