

Epiphany 4, Sunday, February 3rd, 2019

Readings: Jeremiah 1:4-10, Psalm 71:1-6, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 4: 21-30

## ‘God Language’ Public Faith, Public Theology

### Introduction

Martin Luther King and Jesus of Nazareth had something in common: they knew how to speak about God in the public realm, in the public sphere, in the public square. In their employment of God language, they knew how to garner, to produce *a response*, how to incite, to foment, to rouse *a reaction*.

As you saw, in the famous speech of 1963 in Washington DC, King grasped biblical imagery as a means to denounce the injustice of racism. His use of clauses like “I have a dream today”, “Let freedom reign” and “the rough places will be made plain and the crooked places will be made straight”, evoked biblical kingdom visions in order to challenge and excite. Last week, we *also* witnessed Jesus, using the biblical imagery of Jubilee, to awaken responses and reactions. Those enduring words, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, to proclaim good news to the poor...to proclaim liberty to the captives...to set free the oppressed, and to announce the year of the Lord’s favour”.

Both men were masters in speaking about God in the public realm, in the public sphere, in the public square.

Today I want to pursue this question of faith in the public domain: what we refer to as “public theology”. I want to turn to the readings from the Gospel of Luke and Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians, exploring what happens in each, when it comes to public faith.

### The Readings

**Luke:** The Gospel for today, is a continuation of the reading from last week. Whereas, Jesus proclaimed the Jubilee; something that would have thrilled any loyal *poor* Jew – not so the affluent – what follows, will be guaranteed to make everyone in his home town – rich and poor – absolutely livid. A few points:

First, the initial response to Jesus’ words is favourable, probably because the idea of Jubilee was a strictly Jewish idea, assumed by his home town to refer to Jewish affairs alone. In a sense, ‘the nod’ of approval given, gushed, “yes, he understands his ethnic, religious roots, his connections, his loyalty to us, his people...he is *our* boy” In fact, the collective words that follow, “Isn’t he the son of Joseph”? are very positive indeed, pointing to his paternity, to his father. If they had said, “Isn’t he the son of Mary”, the view would have been very different. In a misogynist, society, reference to the mother would have most certainly implied, questionable parentage, doubtful, ancestry.

Second, the mood changes: but why? Well, it has to do with the idea of Jubilee, of liberation and freedom, of God’s, of Yahweh’s favour, *extending beyond religious and ethnic limits*. Jesus’ reference to the prophet Elijah and the Zarephath widow, and then to the prophet Elisha and Naaman, the Syrian (1 Kgs 17:8-24, 2 Kings 5: 1-19), is all about talking about God in a quite different way to the village mainstream. In both cases, a prophet came to the aid of a non-Jew, a Gentile. The widow was on the margins of society and undoubtedly poor. Naaman, on the other hand, was powerful--the commander of Syria's army--but suffered from leprosy. In making this statement, Jesus is putting his people on notice: God is *not* Jewish, God transcends ethnic, cultural and religious boundaries, God *is* greater than your theological and ethical limits. It was Jesus’ refusal to abide

by the community's myopic world-view, the perception of him as dangerously liberal, that led to their attempt to assassinate him.

**Corinthians:** Let's now turn to Paul's Letter to the Corinthian community. On the face of it, this appears to be very different. This passage about love is read almost exclusively at weddings. The prose and poetry are moving, but this passage, is not about romantic, idealistic, relationships. In fact, this "hymn to love" as it is often deemed, is about the very practical question of what holds a community – which is at breaking point – together. For Paul, love is not about feelings, but God's gift, which grounds and energizes the ethical life of the church.

The problem in this Corinthian community, is about its basis, its foundation. An impossibly snobbish church, what grounded it, was the way in which God-given gifts were employed as means to personal and group power. Certain gifts were prized over others – for example the gift of preaching over the gift of charity and solidarity. Reinforcing this "religious snobbery" was the economic and class lines that were drawn in the sand. This is what Paul attacks, this is what Paul denounces. For Paul, the *body politic* of the church can never be recoded, reconfigured upon class lines or 'honour systems'. All of this nonsense that we construct in our communities, in our societies, is overcome "*en Christo*" – "in Christ". Love is the new basis, the new foundation, the new ground, for the way we relate to each other, for the way we structure our Christian churches, and the way we ultimately see the world.

Let's sum this up! The value systems, the ethics, the world-view of both groups: the home town neighbours of Jesus, and the Christian community of Corinth – both betray the God whom they proclaim. For the Jews, their faith-based, ethno-centrism, no, their racism denies Yahweh. For the Corinthians, their obsessive class and honour-systems, deny Christ.

Fergus Kerr, to whom we referred earlier in our sayings about God language, has it absolutely right. The sort of God we believe in, we reveal, not so much through our orthodox confessions of faith, but through our value systems, our world view and our actions. It is these things, that declare our true beliefs.

The Christianity of Martin Luther King, the Christianity of Paul, the Christianity of Jesus, is the only public Christianity that is worth living and dying for.