

OPEN MINDS, BURNING HEARTS

Journeying through Luke's Gospel: II. Nazareth

Text: Luke 4:16-30

1. The Meaning of Nazareth: Jesus' Town in Luke's Story So Far

Our question for this session: what does Nazareth mean? In particular, what does this moment in Nazareth mean?



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Preparation: what has Nazareth meant so far in Luke's Gospel?

- 1) **Nazareth is significant:** in contrast to its previous insignificance (not mentioned in OT; dwarfed by great city of Sepphoris 3 1/2 miles away).
- 2) **Nazareth is home:** for Luke (in contrast to Matthew), Nazareth is where Mary and Joseph live prior to the birth of Jesus; twice now Luke has explicitly told us that the holy family came back home, to Nazareth (2:39, 51).
- 3) **Nazareth has become a holy place:** the angel Gabriel has appeared there, thus making Nazareth one of those places where the veil separating heaven and earth is very thin.
- 4) **Nazareth is the place of learning:** twice already, Luke has spoken of how in Nazareth the child Jesus grew in wisdom (2:40, 52: in language reminiscent of the boy Samuel; like the prophet Samuel, Jesus advances in wisdom and in divine and human favour, see 1 Sam 2:26); he tells us that Jesus learned to be obedient to Mary and Joseph (2:51).
- 5) Developing quotation from Benedict XVI's *Verbum Domini*: if the Word "was abbreviated" at Bethlehem, that **abbreviation continued in Nazareth**, as Christ learns to pray, to sing the psalms, to love his Father and his neighbours.

“The patristic and medieval tradition, in contemplating this “Christology of the word”, employed an evocative expression: the word was “abbreviated”. ... the eternal word became small – small enough to fit into a manger. He became a child, so that the word could be grasped by us” (Benedict XVI, Verbum Domini 12).

2. Jesus in the Synagogue: Exploring the Meaning

- 1) We can’t over-emphasize the importance of this event for Luke: the opening scene of the Galilean ministry, after just two summary verses (Luke 4:14-15).
- 2) His version is also a significantly expanded, and more complex, version of the story we find in Matthew and Mark.
- 3) For Luke, this episode (the Isaiah reading, and the homily which follows it) is the key to understanding Jesus’ ministry.
- 4) The wording of the quotation from Isaiah 61 is significant: Luke’s version is closer to the Greek LXX than the Hebrew, though modified, with further echoes of other passage from Isaiah). Strikingly, Jesus finishes reading in mid-sentence, climaxing on the year of Jubilee, but omitting the phrase ‘and the day of vengeance of our God.



James Tissot,
Jesus Unrolls the Scroll in the Synagogue
(1886-1894; Brooklyn Museum; in public domain)

Isaiah

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour, and the day of vengeance of our God...” (Isa 61:1-2a NRSV).

Isaiah LXX

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to heal the broken in heart, to proclaim release to captives, and recovery of sight to blind people, to proclaim an acceptable year of the Lord and a day of vengeance ...” (Isa 61:1-2a).

Luke

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to captives, and recovery of sight to blind people, to send out oppressed people in release [*Isa 58:6*], to proclaim an acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19).

5) This sets the tone for Jesus' ministry: it prepares us for a ministry which is marked *by marginality*.

6) Nazareth, his hometown, initially responds favourably (it is still his home, his townspeople still his own people); the change comes when he relates his ministry to aspects of the ministry of OT prophets Elijah and Elisha, sent to outsiders, a widow and a leper outside Israel (Jesus can no longer be contained, he is not 'their prophet', but sent also to outsiders who may respond more positively).

7) The story ends on a literal cliff-hanger: how did Jesus get out of this sticky situation? Luke doesn't tell us; he leaves it to our imaginations.

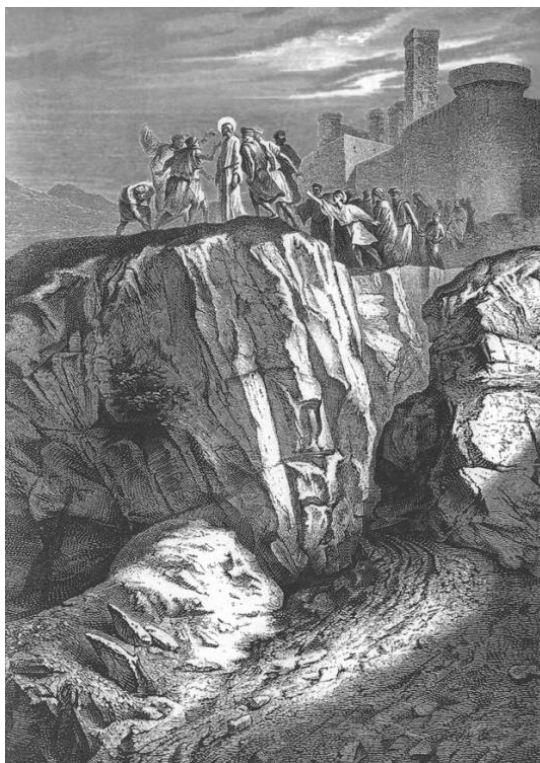
3. How has Nazareth Changed?

The meaning of Nazareth changes dramatically:

1) The home, the place of security and education and learning, has become a hostile place, a dangerous place.

2) It is a warning to us who think of ourselves as God's people, and people close to Christ – that proximity doesn't necessarily lead to understanding and acceptance.

3) But Nazareth is also the place of revelation: where we get a glimpse of the particular values of the Kingdom of God; the priorities of Jesus' ministry as it now begins; and the kind of people who can expect to understand it, to receive it as good news, and to embrace it enthusiastically.



Alexandre Bida,
Jesus is Rejected in Nazareth
(1874; in public domain)