

Fr. Roger J. Landry
Retreat on Living Religiously By Faith in the Year of Faith
Sisters of Jesus our Hope, Bloomsbury, New Jersey
July 29 to August 2, 2013
Lev 23:1, 4-11; 15-16, 27, 34-37; Ps 81; Mt 13:54-58

The Receptivity of Our Faith

- Today's Gospel brings into focus for us why we are celebrating this year a Year of Faith. In it we see portrayed in striking detail so many of the elements about which we've been praying and pondering since Monday and we also see laid out for us what need to be some of the elements of the spiritual game plan the Lord wants us to follow as we live not only the rest of this Year of Faith but the rest of what ought to characterize our Life of Faith.
- Jesus arrives in his hometown and headed to the synagogue on a Sabbath. He was invited by the Chazzan, the synagogue leader, to read a passage of God's word and to give a commentary. By this point, Jesus already had a reputation for teaching with authority unlike any had ever heard. He was becoming famous especially for the miracles he was working throughout Galilee, like casting out demons, curing the sick and the paralyzed, and feeding great multitudes with a few buns and sardines. St. Luke tells us that Jesus asked for and unrolled the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and read one of the most famous passages referring to the Messiah for whom the Jews had long awaited. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," he declared, "because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And then he came a one sentence homily: "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing
- St. Matthew tells us in today's Gospel that the Nazarenes' first reaction to Jesus' teaching was astonishment. They were amazed at the "gracious words that came from his mouth" and "the wisdom that had been given to him," both of which were probably very much on display in the way he read the Words of Isaiah than he himself from heaven had inspired. But that quickly changed once they began to reflect what he said. Jesus was saying that he was the MESSIAH, that all the words the Isaiah wrote about the Messiah were being fulfilled in him. That couldn't be, they thought, because they knew him. "Where did this man get such wisdom and mighty deeds?" they began to murmur. "Is he not the carpenter's son? Is not his mother named Mary? Where did this man get all this?" They were questioning his credentials, probably thinking themselves wiser than Joseph and Mary and smarter than any of the carpenter's supposed progeny. They probably had pieces of furniture he made. Perhaps he had played with them and their kids when he was younger. They probably had seen him many times at the well of Nazareth helping his mother. Their astonishment at this man who taught unlike their scribes and Pharisees — who would mesmerize the crowds on mountainsides and seashores, whom spies would later say spoke unlike others had ever spoken — was not just over what he said, but who said it, because they knew there was no way one they knew could ever speak like that.
- Beyond that, if the Scripture he had read was being fulfilled in their hearing and he had come to proclaim the Gospel to the POOR, liberty to CAPTIVES, recovery of sight to the BLIND, freedom to the OPPRESSED, then they naturally began to ask themselves whether he was saying THEY were poor, captive, blind and oppressed.
- But rather than engage their consciences to see if it might be true, if Jesus were the Messiah and had come for them, to bring them from where they were to where God would want to lead them; rather than humbly asking, "What should we do?" they took offense at him. Despite his beautiful words, despite the astonishment of his preaching, despite the reputation he had earned elsewhere, he offended them. Some, nevertheless, were willing to keep him on stage. They began to ask him to put on a magic show and see if he could do healings like they had heard he had done in the Synagogue of Capernaum. St. Mark tells us, however, that Jesus not only *didn't* do miracles there but couldn't — except for the healing of a few sick — because of their lack of faith. In order to provoke them to faith, Jesus described the faith of some pagans whose faith led to great miracles, but they didn't want to have anything to do with it. Because they didn't trust in Jesus, they weren't going to trust in anything he said.

- Jesus knew their thoughts. If he were the Messiah, it would necessarily change their relationship with him and, in fact, change their whole lives, and that was something they didn't want. Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and in his own house." That, St. Luke tells us, "filled them with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff, but he passed through the midst of them and went on his way."
- In the matter of a few minutes, these good people — people who went to the synagogue religiously on the Sabbath — went from praising Jesus and amazement, to doubts, to taking offense at him, to trying to kill him. In the beat of an eye, they went from praying in the synagogue to expelling and trying to murder their guest preacher. Not only would they not accept Jesus as a prophet by heeding his words and welcoming him as they would the God who sent him, but they, like preceding generations who "kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to it" (Mt 23:37), would seek to kill him.
- This wouldn't be the last time the people turned on the Lord so quickly. About two years later in Jerusalem, the people, after having heard his tremendous preaching, after having witnessed his miracles, five days after having shouted to him with palm branches, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" cried out in cacophonous unison, "Crucify Him!" and "Give us, Barabbas," a murderer and a thief. The Nazarenes tried to run him out of town; the residents of Jerusalem allowed him to drag his bloody, exhausted frame and heavy Cross outside the city gates by himself. The Nazarenes tried to toss him over the hill; the people of Jerusalem tried to crucify him on a hill. In both circumstances, however, with incredible speed, their thoughts changed from amazement to homicide
- Jesus' reaction to all of this was, St. Luke informs us, "amazement at their lack of faith." In other cities, strangers who didn't know him growing up were willing to leave everything to follow him, were moved and converted by his preaching, and were amazed by his miraculous power such that they with faith were bringing to him all those who needed help. But among his own, he was rejected and deserving of death. It was a blow that seemed to knock the spiritual wind out of Jesus such that he could work no miracles there.
- For us, two thousand years later, we're driven to ask: How is this possible? How could people who were regulars at the synagogue and the temple, who seemed hungry for the word of God, who praised Jesus with words in Nazareth and palm branches in Jerusalem, all of a sudden seek to KILL him? Why wouldn't they just have ignored him? The reason is, I think, is found in St. John's prologue: "He came to his own, and his own people did not accept him. ... The light came into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil." They didn't want a real Messiah, even or especially if he were a native son who knew them and their habits, because a real Messiah would necessarily change their behavior. The real Messiah was a threat to their existence. They wanted both to keep their concept of Messiah neatly packaged and unthreatening, and to keep Jesus from having any sway over them, because if he were the Messiah, then they would have to change, and they preferred to live in their darkness. They preferred not to have Scripture fulfilled in their hearing. They didn't want to hear the good news. They didn't want to be set free from their self-imposed prisons. They did not want to be cured of their spiritual blindness. Jesus spoke and acted with an authority that didn't allow a simple refusal. His message would reverberate in their consciences. The only way to eliminate the message he was proclaiming was, they concluded, to eliminate the messenger.
- But this Gospel does not refer merely to what happened 2000 years ago when Jesus returned to his hometown. Like every Gospel, it must be actualized, applied to the present day. To do that, we first need to ask who are Jesus' "own" people today? Who are his kinsmen? Who are the modern Nazarenes that he wants to accept him as a prophet and have Scripture fulfilled in their midst? The answer is: WE ARE. Through baptism, we have become true members of his family, his spiritual brothers and sisters. Through the Eucharist, we become blood relatives. Most of us have grown up with the Lord our whole lives. We've familiar with him. As with our other relatives, we have many pictures of him in our homes, we celebrate his birthday every winter, we celebrate the most important moment of his life every spring. The question for us is whether our familiarity with Jesus STRENGTHENS OUR FAITH as it should or WEAKENS it, as it did with the Nazarenes. Do we allow our greater contact with Jesus to help us grow in love for him

or make us take him for granted? Do we embrace him fully like the Nazarene girl who said “Let it be done to me according to your word?” or take offense at him like the others in his hometown?

- The whole reason for the Year of Faith is because for the vast majority of Catholics our greater familiarity with Jesus, rather than making us saints through becoming more and more like him, has led us to take him for granted and often even offense. We’re offended by Jesus’ “prudish and unrealistic” teachings on marriage and purity of heart. We’re affronted by Jesus’ totally “wimpish and naïve” teachings on meekness and the forgiveness even of enemies. We’re peeved at Jesus’ coming after our money and telling us to give it to the poor. We’re piqued at his telling us we need to welcome illegal immigrants as if we’re welcoming him in Egypt, to dress the naked rather than gawk at them in artistic pornography, to feed the hungry rather than waiting for them to get a job and earn their food, to cross the road and care for the sick rather than letting someone else who has the responsibility to do it, to visit child molesters and murderers and other low lifes in prison rather than forget about them and call for their execution. We’re irritated by his awful misogyny in not choosing women to be among his 12 apostles and his unforgiveable homophobia in saying that God in the beginning made them male and FEMALE, and saying that man leaves his father and MOTHER rather than two daddies and two mommies, and clings not to whomever he LOVES but to a WIFE, and making marriage dependent on a one flesh union in a child that can only come from a man and a woman rather than in a one-flesh union of sexual contact open to any two adults. And we’re particularly exasperated by Jesus’ greed in wanting us to pray not just when we have the time to fit him in but “always,” to prioritize coming to boring worship services on Sunday rather than sleep in and recreate or get time and a half at work, or making us crawl on the ground and grovel for his forgiveness by demeaningly making us go to human beings just like us who happen to be priests rather than just forgiving us in a much more respectful way, acknowledging the regret we have in our hearts for the wrong we’ve done. We can multiply the offenses, but the point is, Jesus remains as offensive today as he ever was. He tries to call us to joy of conversion, to cure our blindness, to heal our illness, but many of us want to believe that he is the one with the problem, not us. And God help the bishops and priests, the sisters and brothers, the parents or grandparents, the Christian friends who remind us of Jesus’ message and treat it as if it is good news rather than categorically insensitive to our values and the enlightened spirit of the age.
- The Year of Faith is meant to help us to hit a reset button in our spiritual life, to ponder our relationship with God, and to remember that to believe in him means to accept him with trust and to allow him to lead us on the way to the truth and the fullness of life. It’s meant to help us to make the exodus from the darkness to the light. It’s meant to restore us in faith so that Jesus can do great miracles among us, not just the physical miracles that still occur in so many places to those who ask Jesus with faith, but the far more important moral and spiritual miracles of raising us from the dead when we’ve crucified the good Lord within through sin.
- Unlike so many of his fellow Nazarenes who went from astonishment and amazement, to doubt, to taking offense at him, and then to try to kill the message he was announcing by throwing him the messenger to his death over a cliff, we are called to begin with astonishment and amazement and pass to faith, to embrace him and his message and live the message together with the messenger, allowing him who is love itself to grow ever more within us so that we will become and remain the sacrament of his total-love in the world.
- Today the same Jesus who came to his own in Nazareth, comes here to Bloomsbury, to us who have not just become his hometown but his temples. He’s already taught us in Sacred Scripture, which is being fulfilled by Him live in our hearing. He awaits our embracing him in faith and letting His word take flesh in us. As we prepare to receive the Word made Flesh in Holy Communion, let us ask him first to make our hearts fitting and hospitable places for Him to dwell, like the Blessed Virgin Mary’s, so that like her we may take Jesus and his love within us out to others so that he may announce to them the good news of how he seeks to enrich them by his poverty, help them to see by faith, set them free from their sins, and enjoy not just a year of the Lord’s favor but an eternity!