

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Septuagesima Sunday
January 24, 2016

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After Our Lord's Baptism we are told He was driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit, and was tempted by Satan for forty days. (Christening parties have come a long way since then!) Those temptations were mostly shortcuts to fame and popularity. We always hear about them on the First Sunday of Lent. And although we do not know for certain, it just might have been in the desert when the Lord first saw the Cross far down the road. At any rate, Jesus rejected shortcuts.

Returning from the desert, Our Lord began His ministry. Saint Mathew describes it as "preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people." (4:23) In all this the Lord was immensely popular. He could have gone on with a healing ministry for years. The possibilities for a glorious career were endless. That was part of Satan's temptation. But God-made-man had not come to have a career! The Lord knew His calling. His essential work was not with bodies but with *souls*. He had come to bring men and women face to face with the demands of God upon their souls. And after He had done that, *then* what would they think of the popular healer and wonder worker? The Lord got His answer right away.

Jesus decided to make this change of emphasis in His ministry by returning to His hometown Nazareth. A modern analogy might be a politician going to his hometown to declare his candidacy for public office. Standing on the front steps of his birthplace he makes the announcement. In Nazareth Jesus was the local boy made good. The people had heard of His fame as a preacher and healer. So it was natural He be asked to read the scriptures and preach in the synagogue on the next Sabbath. Word must have spread quickly: Jesus was back in town. Everyone was there for the service. That event is today's gospel at Mass.

The festive mood changed quickly. When Jesus read from *Isaiah 61* the people all noticed something strange. His words had a superhuman force. It was a bit of a puzzle to these folks. Their eyes saw Jesus the son of the carpenter Joseph. But *the words sounded like God Himself speaking into their souls*. Little did they know!

Then after the lesson, Our Lord sat down and we are told "all eyes were upon Him." Then He preached. The Lord's Nazareth sermon is not recorded in scripture.

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But we *do* have the opening words. He said, “Today hath this scripture been fulfilled in your ears.” That is the moment the festive mood changed. Jesus never spoke to people just to increase their general fund of knowledge! The sermon at Nazareth was a case in point. The people probably expected an appreciation of the lofty and exalted cadences of the prophet Isaiah. But this sermon was challenging its hearers to get their souls from having knowledge *about* the scriptures to realizing that God is a *living, vivid, clear, reality* Who is present to them in a way they did not understand. After reading the familiar and beautiful words of Isaiah, Jesus was, in effect, saying, “Everything you people profess in your faith is true. Do you know that? Isaiah’s prophecy about the Messiah is being fulfilled right here in your street-corner synagogue in Nazareth. How do you like that?”

They *didn’t* like being told Isaiah wasn’t just entertainment. What he said came to happen. It is much safer and predictable to know *about* the scriptures and participate in routine ritual than to fall into the hands of the living God. Truth is, we don’t like that either. What we believe with our minds is not always what we actually believe in our hearts or show in our actions. We don’t always “walk the talk.” And it is very difficult to escape living this contradictory life.

We would think it absurd if a professor renowned for his lectures on the responsibilities of freedom and democracy never actually showed up in a voting booth! How does our profession of Christian faith look from the outside? Is it equally absurd? Or is there a genuine connection between the Lord Jesus, our souls, and the conduct of our lives? You don’t need me to tell you Christians are dedicated to making professed beliefs living truths. Our opinions, actions, and life choices, are based on the fact that Jesus is Lord.

The Incarnate Son of God one day walked into His hometown synagogue with an invitation to do just that very thing. Commenting on the professed faith of the hometown crowd Jesus said, “I am here to tell you it is all true! So get your act together!” But by the time the sun went down on that Sabbath day, the town of Nazareth, in defense of its religion, had a great relief and contentment they had got rid of this highly suspicious preacher. That meant the *next* Sabbath would be a much more pleasant worship experience. (That is something akin to what many of

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today's Catholic parishes state as their goal for Sunday worship.) *But Almighty God would not be there.!*