

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Third Sunday after The Epiphany
January 27, 2019

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The gospel passage you just heard is Saint Luke's account of Our Lord's sermon in His hometown Nazareth. What could be better than this? When Jesus began His ministry all went well and His fame spread rapidly. Jesus became widely known as a healer and was in great demand. He had a large following. If the Lord were a candidate in a primary election campaign all the other candidates would have dropped out! So the Lord's synagogue sermon was an event not to be missed.

But it is also important to know what St Luke tells us happened *before* and *after* this hometown sermon. Just prior to His visit to Nazareth Jesus had been in the wilderness after His Baptism, where He had been tempted by the devil for forty days. That event is always our Mass gospel on the First Sunday of Lent.

In the wilderness Our Lord had chosen the hard way to accomplish redemption. The devil offered fame and popularity. Jesus chose the way of rejection and death. The decision was the right one. And it was firmly and irrevocably made. Jesus had sent the devil packing. There could be no turning back. The battle lines were drawn.

What happened at the *end* of the Lord's sermon is also left off today's reading. The hometown crowd suddenly turned against Jesus and He was hustled out of the synagogue by a 1st-Century lynch mob! So keep the *before* and *after* in mind. Knowing those things helps us understand what is going on in the seemingly calm and normal Sabbath morning when Jesus came to the synagogue.

As described, the Nazareth Sabbath morning reminds me of the very genteel coffee hour after 11am Mass in my home parish in Chicago. In the parish hall was a long table, nicely draped, with flowers and candles. A lady, usually the wife of a vestryman, sat at each end of the table offering coffee or tea. There were pastries, and a set of clear-glass rectangle-shaped plates. They had a recessed spot where the matched glass coffee cup would fit so as not to slide. Nothing was offered for children because the Family Mass and Christian education were at 9am. I only went to the coffee hour when I was an altar server for 11am Mass. And my coffee consisted of equal parts sugar and cream with a little coffee on top! So think of the

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experience at Nazareth with the popular hometown preacher and the town turned out to hear him on a pleasant Sabbath morning.

Although Christ desired to bring joy and hope and comfort to people, those healings were mostly only reaching people's physical bodies. Jesus knew His essential work was with *souls*. He could have gone on with the healings. Just think: if Almighty God had delayed the Incarnation until the jet age Jesus could in a single lifetime have rid the whole world of disease and illness. All He needed was modern aviation! But the Incarnation was not planned for that purpose. Nor was it intended to usher in political salvation for Israel. And that was a very hard point for the Jews to accept.

St Luke does not give us the actual sermon Jesus preached at Nazareth. Chances are Luke didn't have the sermon. But we know its *substance*, and the fact the hometown crowd rejected it *and Jesus*. The Messiah would be a disappointment to any patriotic Jewish audience. These people did not object to the idea of God doing acts of mercy. But in their thinking the Messiah would restore the kingdom to Israel and the glory Jerusalem had in the days of King David. Our Lord was emphatic that this was not God's way. We don't know how much of this Jesus revealed at Nazareth. But when the Lord ended His sermon and sat down, the people were deeply disappointed and offended to the point of doing something violent.

The Incarnation was God's idea. Christ came because all men and women must come face to face with the demands of Almighty God upon their souls. That message made people begin to think very differently about Jesus. Yes, He began by attracting crowds. But it is a hard and clear fact in all four Gospel accounts that at the end, on the Cross, Jesus was quite alone. That was precisely because He was perfectly doing the will of the Father. And left to ourselves, *we don't*.