

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourth Sunday after The Epiphany  
February 3, 2019

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Saint Luke's Gospel opens the account of Christ's ministry with a sequence of events proclaimed on a grand stage. Christ formally announced His commission; He manifested the power of the Holy Ghost; He was rejected by His countrymen and indicated the gospel was extended to the Gentiles. The setting of this announcement was the sermon Christ preached in His hometown Nazareth.

We were given the gist of the *scene* at Nazareth in the gospel at last Sunday's Mass. Today is part two! Here is the final reaction to the Lord's sermon. There was no responsive heart in the synagogue crowd. Jesus anticipated their complaint. "Physician, heal thyself" means "Why don't you do here on your hometown turf the things we hear you do everywhere else?" The Lord always declined to operate on that basis and so He did no miracle at Nazareth. But His refusal was not the reason the Jews tried to kill Him

What *really* enraged the people at Nazareth was the pertinent example Jesus gave of two of the most famous Old Testament prophets. Elijah and Elisha were heroes to the Jews. And these heroes chose to dispense favors among foreigners rather than among their own countrymen. You remember the famous stories: Elijah took care of the widow of Sidon during a famine. Elisha healed the Syrian Naaman of leprosy. *Foreigners!*

At the very outset of Christ's ministry the gospels portray the tendency of the Jewish race to reject Jesus as Lord. As a consequence, they are removed from the position of honor and responsibility to which God had called them. The Lord Jesus addressed this situation with several parables: that of the wicked husbandman; that of the two sons; the parable about laborers in the vineyard. And perhaps above all, the parable of the wedding feast. In it, the original invitees would not come, and offered excuses. So the empty places at the banquet were filled with the halt, the blind, and the lame. The king said "Go into the lanes of the city, and into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in." This does not necessarily describe people with physical infirmities. It does describe those outside the Covenant and who therefore were not benefitting from the Scriptures. It is also a description of the Catholic Church and her mission. The Jews had rejected God.

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God had rejected His people, and the Gentiles had been called. By the time Saint Luke the Evangelist was organizing the materials for his gospel account this pattern was already very clear in the life of the Church. The Apostles first went to the Jews and to converts to Judaism, and then, following St Paul's bold example, to the Gentiles.

The Jews had long been accustomed to being the sole beneficiaries of God's covenant. It seemed unbelievable to them God should even be *able* to do without them! So when Our Lord reminded hostile Nazareth about Elijah and Elisha it was a stinging rebuke to a misplaced patriotism and theology. The sermon at Nazareth was the first, but certainly not the last, time Christ had to give Israel a reality check. On another occasion He declared, "I say unto you that God is able *out of these stones* to raise up children to Abraham." And again, "Many shall come from the east and the west, and the children of the kingdom shall be cast out."

There is a warning here for us. If the most dangerous thing is thinking you can do without God, the *second* most dangerous is to think God cannot do without you! *In both Testaments* Scripture records the fate of the chosen people whose pride dared God to show He could do without them. That is a warning for Catholics who think their membership in the Bride of Christ allows them to think and act any way they want. The warning is also for non-Catholics who have accepted the Church's claims as true yet remain outside the fold. They are also culpable. For Jesus Christ, by other means, will bring His unswerving purpose to fulfillment, *with* or *without* our obedience and cooperation.

On the Sabbath Day at Nazareth the people, having nearly lynched Jesus, were smug in the satisfaction they had defended their religion and resisted a highly suspicious character! *Yet God literally walked out on them that day.* Saint John declared this situation and danger in words we all know so well: "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not. But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the Sons of God, even to them that believe on His Name, which were born not of blood, not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."