

## *Powerful speech*

*A sermon prresched at Christ Church Deer Park Anglican Church as part of thre Churches on-the Hill preacher exchange in The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, January 21, 2007*

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*Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. <sup>15</sup> He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. (Lk. 4:14-15)*

There is no doubt that Jesus was a great communicator – probably the greatest! His stories, his parables, even his ability to read a passage of scripture – all were, in the fullest sense, *inspired communication*.

A modern essay on communication and narrative made this observation (*listen closely*):

*“Society is part of the paradigm of narrativity,” says Sartre; however, according to Finnis<sup>[1]</sup>, it is not so much society that is part of the paradigm of narrativity, but rather the defining characteristic, and subsequent futility, of society. ...*

*If one examines neocultural textual theory, one is faced with a choice: either accept precultural deconstructivism or conclude that consciousness may be used to disempower the underprivileged. Lyotard uses the term ‘neocultural textual theory’ to denote the role of the poet as writer. Therefore, the subject is contextualised into a capitalist pretextual theory that includes reality as a paradox. Neocultural textual theory states that truth is capable of intent, but only if the premise of precultural deconstructivism is invalid. It could be said that if neocultural textual theory holds, we have to choose between Debordist image and structural dematerialism.*

What you have just heard is utter nonsense – really non-sense. It is “completely meaningless and was randomly generated by a computer program –called the *Postmodernism Generator* - a system for generating random text.” <sup>1</sup>

In fact, on the Net, you can easily find several clever random jargon generators. You may have read about some of them recently in the *Globe*

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.elsewhere.org/pomo>

and Mail<sup>2</sup> They tend to follow a basic model: pick one word at random from each of three columns and put them together to form a trendy three-word phrase. The business jargon generator will easily give you phrases such as *integrated reciprocal management*, the social science language generator will yield insights such as *dialectical participatory interdependence*. And the educational jargon generator will produce a verb-adjective-noun combination such as *maximize child-centered assessment*. With these jargon generators, you too can give the impression of saying something very profound without, in fact, saying anything meaningful at all!

We are constantly encounter meaningless jargon. Much of it is trendy speech which, by the time most people begin using it in their everyday language, has lost its novelty and become just another addition to the litter of our language. Overused words such as *synergy*, *paradigm shift*, *take it to the next level*, and *at the end of the day* and many other examples no longer convey real meaning, but become a kind of popular litany, an automatic, thoughtless interjection. Other words have lost their meaning completely because of such thoughtless over-use: is everything really *awesome*?

What we can note as properly striking in just this text is that although Jesus has already begun to garner quite a good reputation for himself, thus far in Luke's gospel he has not done much. He is doing a lot of teaching (though the precise content of his teaching is left at this point tantalizingly undefined). And this teaching is obviously generating a lot of enthusiasm in Galilee as we are told in verse 15 that everyone was beginning to praise him for his teaching abilities. That's all quite wonderful but it's not exactly the kind of thing anyone would have described as the full in-breaking of God's kingdom.

Yet when Jesus comes to his home synagogue in Nazareth, he reads those stunning words from Isaiah 61 about a grand-scale reversal of all that made human existence miserable. The poor would receive good news, the prisoners would be set at liberty, the blind would see and the oppressed would be liberated and released from all that held them in thrall. The picture of shalom that Isaiah sketches there is so fantastically rich that you'd guess that if such a wonderful set of circumstances ever came to pass, everyone would notice. Any one of those items by itself would be striking and noteworthy but all of them put together add up to a picture of reality that

<sup>2</sup> „Stop! I'm suffering from linguistic vertigo" Globe and Mail, January 18, 2007, R1.

would be quite different from the world that gets described in the average day's newspaper.

Jesus amazes the good folks in the synagogue that day by declaring that on that day, those words had been fulfilled "in your hearing." But unless there is a whole lot that Luke is simply not telling us, it appears that even Nazareth proper did not experience at that very moment on that very day some kind of shalom outburst. We can probably safely assume that somewhere in the vicinity there were still some blind people, that the County Jail did not magically empty out, that poor beggars on the streets did not hear an encouraging word (much less have their pockets suddenly fill up with shekels), that Roman oppression continued uninterrupted. Indeed, so far as we know, Jesus had yet to heal a single blind or sick person anywhere.

So how could this have been fulfilled that very day in the hearing of those very people? Obviously it will not work to try to take or apply this in some wooden, literal sense. So maybe we should take the first and last words as the encapsulation of what Jesus claims to have fulfilled and understand the specifics in between as things that were still in process. If we understand it this way, we could see how "The Spirit of the Lord" is on Jesus and we can believe that he has come to "proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" in some Jubilee sense of setting all things to right again. That much for certain had been fulfilled as of that moment. The other items would soon follow as a result.

But not universally and not immediately or all at once. Therein lies one of the fundamental tensions inherent within the Christian gospel, its proclamation, and its claims. To this day when telling a Jewish person your belief that Jesus is the Messiah, this person may well ask you, "Well, if Jesus was the Messiah, where is his kingdom?" And indeed, despite Jesus' having repeatedly proclaimed that the kingdom of God was at hand, that in some sense the kingdom had indeed arrived through his own death and resurrection, the entire world did not change in one fell, visible swoop as a result.

As on that day in Nazareth, so now: we live "in the already and the not yet," we live "between the times," we are already now citizens of the heavenly kingdom and yet carry around the passports issued by nations on this earth. Even in Jesus' day, for all the blind and deaf Jesus healed, he did not heal them all. For every little girl or young man Jesus raised back to life from the

dead, untold numbers of others remained in their graves or passed away during the course of Jesus' ministry. Even Lazarus died again (in fact, according to John, the Pharisees plotted to kill Lazarus at the same time they plotted to arrest Jesus. Whether or not they succeeded, we know that Lazarus is not still walking the streets of this earth!).

In Christ the kingdom came. It epiphanied into our time and space. We live in its light and reality yet today. But picking up today's newspaper will confirm that poverty, sickness, oppression, and death have not been eradicated. The kingdoms of this world may have already become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ, but what we can see with our eyes reveals to us that the kingdoms of this world have a lot of kick in them yet.

One day in Nazareth long ago, Jesus read a most amazing passage about the inbreaking of God's shalom. He then quietly sat down and declared in plain language that this had already happened. That's rather startling. But really, do we proclaim anything less startling each week when we gather for worship? Can we sense the tensions inherent in being a Christian, in being someone who even 2,000 years later continues to invite people into the kingdom, despite the condition of the world that is so manifestly obvious all around us? Recognizing this may help to enhance the authenticity of our message and witness. Let's not be so namby-pamby, starry-eyed, or otherworldly that in our witness to the kingdom, we come off as the ONLY people who cannot see how bad off the world still is.

Amen.