

516 The Ekklesia

After Jesus, “being full of the Holy Ghost”, had overcome the various temptations put in His path by the devil with His three-fold response of “It is written” (Luke 4.1-13), we read that He “returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee: and there went out a fame of him through all the region round about. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all” (from Luke 4.14-15, KJV).

What a start to His public ministry! He had seen off the devil’s overt attacks on His Person and Mission, and now in Galilee He was becoming a famous, popular teacher as He reached out to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15.24). Perhaps another temptation came His way – “This is all just so easy!”.

And then – “he came to Nazareth ...” (Luke 4.16), knowing that His arrival in His home town would be a particular challenge, for many in that “synagogue on the sabbath day” would have known Him since His childhood. We can sense the hushed anticipation as, having “stood up for to read”, Jesus carefully chose from “the book of the prophet Esaias” what are now for us those verses from Isaiah Chapter 61 (4.17): He was going to “let them have it, with both barrels”, so to speak! – whatever the consequences.

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me ... to preach good tidings unto the poor ... to heal the brokenhearted ... to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord (from Luke 4.18-19, based on Isaiah 61.1-2). Jesus knew, and knew that the people knew, that these words were strongly Messianic in meaning, and would have their fulfilment only when Messiah had come.

Jesus duly “closed the book ...gave [it] again to the minister, and sat down” (v.20a). It was “pin-drop” time – “the eyes of all of them ... were fastened on him” (v.20b). “And he began to say unto them, ‘This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears’” (v.21).

Their first reaction was a proverbial “Wow!” – over “the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth” (v.22a). But then the questioning started, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” (v.22b), implying, “Who does this fellow think he is?”. We notice that Jesus only “began” to speak of this precious scripture now being fulfilled in His Person (v.21a), for presumably the hubbub prevented Him from explaining the situation in

more detail. When He could, Jesus then reminded them of a blunt “home truth”: during the famine and drought, Elijah was sent, not to the many widows in Israel, but to a Gentile widow up near Sidon; and despite the many lepers around him in Israel, Elisha’s healing ministry was confined only to Naaman the Syrian (vv.25-27 / I Kings 17.8-24 / II Kings Chapter 5).

These words enraged the people (Luke 4.28-30), as Jesus surely knew would happen, but He uttered them fearlessly anyway. For these incidents with Elijah and Elisha demonstrated that the Lord God was (and is) lovingly concerned with Gentiles as well as with Jews. Yes, the Jews were His covenant people, through no merit of their own, but the Lord would bless whomsoever He wished to bless. He would go beyond His covenant with the Jews, especially so when they spurned Him, and - as was happening right now in Nazareth – spurned God’s own Son, the Jewish Messiah, as well.

We all know how that spurning unfolded, with Jesus’ eventual betrayal, trial, death, resurrection and ascension into glory. Consequently once again the Lord God went beyond His original covenant with the Jews, by forming the ‘ekklesia’, the ‘called-out ones’, (the ‘church’ – being people, not buildings!), and thereby granting, praise God, salvation to Christ-accepting Gentiles as well as to the Christ-accepting Jews.

That is how things still stand, for the moment. Many Jewish branches of “the olive tree” (a picture of covenant Israel) remain broken off because of unbelief, while Gentile branches from “the wild olive tree” have been grafted in (see Romans 11.11-24). But – from Romans 11.25b – the Jews’ partial blindness over Jesus as their Messiah will continue only “until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in”. When that fulness is complete, when the believing ‘ekklesia’ have been removed, and when the following 7-year tribulation has occurred, then the Lord in His mercy will grant salvation to His original, by-then-Christ-accepting, covenant people (Romans 11.25-32). We can only respond to verses 33-36 with that hearty, grateful “Amen!”.

By God’s grace and subsequent protection, the Jewish nation of Israel, though still largely in unbelief concerning Jesus, has existed since 1948, surely a clear sign that “the branch of the fig tree is tender, and is putting forth its leaves” (based on Matthew 24.32). We are to “watch therefore” (24.42a), and to “pray for the peace of Jerusalem” (Psalm 122.6-9) – for, as an early step in these prophecies being fulfilled, the coming of the Lord for His ‘ekklesia’ draws nigh.

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