

DATE: January 17, 2021

SCRIPTURE: Luke 4:14-30

TITLE: Rejected in Nazareth and Birmingham

Luke 4:14-30 Jesus rejected at Nazareth and King arrested in Birmingham

When Jesus came to his hometown to preach and teach, he had already gained some notoriety. Luke tells us that crowds were already gathering to see him teach and perform signs. When he gets to Nazareth, there is already a buzz. When he unrolls the scroll and reads from the Prophet Isaiah “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, . . .” Today this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it” the people were amazed and impressed with this local boy who was doing great things.

By citing this prophetic text, Jesus was declaring the end of exile. For a people suffering under an oppressive Roman regime that crippled them with taxes and stripped them of any real autonomy, the text Jesus read was a welcome reminder. It was a call to the end of exile. It came from their tradition of liberation, and this was a tradition that they held dear.

Then Jesus recalled another tradition—not just one of liberation, but one of equality. He reminded them of Elijah and Elisha, two great prophets of the past who had deep connections to the people’s Messianic hope. He reminded them that they came to the Gentiles, too. This was another part of their tradition—one of justice for all—not just liberation for the Jews. Yet this kind of radical good news was not what they were looking for. They could get on board with their own liberation, but Jesus was talking about something too big—too extreme.

This is Martin Luther King Jr. Day. It is a day when we remember his ministry and mission for justice in the world. It is a day when politicians and lead-

ers love to quote King about love, nonviolence, and peaceful harmony between the races. Our collective memory of King has been sanitized and softened to that of a soft pacifist.

The same people who like

to quote “I have a Dream” tend to ignore the deep criticism he drew. Martin Luther King was not murdered because he wanted black children and white children to play together. He was murdered because he advocated for real social change. He worked for economic equality, fair housing, the end of police brutality, and the end of the Vietnam War. To anyone who quotes “I have a dream,” I remind them that 11 months before he was murdered, he said in an interview, “That dream I had that day has at many points turned into a nightmare.”

Like Jesus, he was accused of being an extremist. Applauded by some when he advocated for decency, he angered most of America for demanding true justice. Jesus drew crowds for preaching good news to the poor, but was murdered for demanding true institutional and social repentance.

If you can, I commend King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” It is available to read for free online. Learn about this great preacher and move beyond “I Have a Dream.” Reflect on his rejection—not in Nazareth—but in our own hearts.



The Martin Luther King Jr Memorial in Washington DC. Photo taken by Robb McCoy