



Proclaiming the Righteous Reign of Jesus: Luke 4 and the Justice of God

DAVID L. TIEDE

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

Richard Shaull calls them “Heralds of a New Reformation” and testifies that the poor of South and North America have become the church’s teachers and the world’s witnesses to God’s justice and mercy. No longer dependent upon a hierarchial system which domesticated the call for justice by spiritualizing everything, the poor are now reading the Scriptures for themselves. They are discovering freedom instead of bondage, human dignity in place of sacralized systems of repression, courage rather than resignation. Other Christian voices from Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe join in the chorus. Many of them have no particular interest in “liberation theology,” and often they are quite disinterested in Marxist analysis.

But they read the Bible, and they discover that it is about this world as well as the world to come. They find that the scriptural story is not an account of God’s blessing of the triumph of economic clout and military superiority. It is a story told from the underside of history. It is the story of a people who were often conquered and exiled and whose vision of God’s will was forged in the heat of prophetic protests against the abuse of the poor, the widow, the orphan, and even the alien. Thus the “good news to the poor” which Jesus proclaimed is good news to them, and they understand the scandal of the cross through immediate connections with the brutality and death they continue to experience.

When the Bible opens new eyes, other communities of faith which are grounded in the Scriptures must take notice. When Luther’s study of Paul caused heaven’s gate to swing wide for him, the power of the Word of God was unleashed in sixteenth century Europe. The meaning of the Scriptures had to be debated anew even by bishops and rulers who were confident that the Bible was on their side. Or when Karl Barth encountered “the strange new world of the Bible,” a volatile confrontation with the gods of culture and ideology ensued. In their contexts, both Luther and Barth found the text of Romans with its radical gospel of justification of the ungodly to be the word to reform the church. Protesting abuses in the world and calling the church to evangelical clarity, they proposed to the church catholic and the world that justification by grace through

faith is the ultimate revelation of the righteous will of God. It is the prism through which all of the Scriptures are to be read so that the commands and promises of God may be rightly discerned and proclaimed.

And is God’s will for justice thereby compromised? “Are we to continue in sin that grace

may abound?" (Romans 6:1). Of course not! But in fact, God's command for justice has taken a new place in the divine economy of the way God deals with us. The God who justifies the ungodly (see Rom 4:5) is still righteous and still seeks justice. God's active righteousness is more than a remedy for sin. Indeed the justification of the ungodly is a divine strategy for justice in the world.

Thus when a new group of Scripture readers begins to instruct the church catholic and the world concerning the character and content of God's justice, those who have been most captured by justification by grace through faith must also take notice. Especially those who preach and teach must consider carefully how effective and faithful this testimony to God's righteousness is. The Word of God is always reforming the church.

Now the text is Luke 4 instead of Romans 3, and the context is largely that of third world Christians calling wealthy first world Christians to listen to the cry of the poor for justice. It is a proclamation of the law of God, offering new hope and dignity to those who have borne the brunt of oppressive economic and political systems, and calling the powerful to repent.

I. THE JUSTICE OF THE KINGDOM

In Luke 4 the newly anointed Messiah Jesus declares the program of his administration, and it is a justice agenda through and through. None of this Messiah's platform is original with him, as if he were to create some new definition of divine righteousness. It all comes from the ancient Word of God as written in the book of Isaiah, with possible allusions to the still more ancient notions and largely unfulfilled promises of the "year of Jubilee." The law and the prophets had long made clear God's standards of justice by which nations and people were to be judged, and the Messiah adds nothing but declares these words to be the program of his reign with the commission of the Spirit of the Lord:

To preach good news to the poor.
To proclaim release to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind.
To set at liberty those who are oppressed.
To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

Those who read these words as Jesus' self-understanding of his mission raise an important historical issue, but it would be beside the point theologically to debate problems of the historical Jesus. Whether or not it can be established exactly when Jesus had this encounter in Nazareth (see Mark 6:1-6), or precisely what he said to offend, Luke's depiction underscores the programmatic character of these words for understanding who Jesus is and what he is about to do in the following narrative. The Jesus with whom the Christian interpreter must contend is finally the exalted Lord whom the evangelist proclaims on this side of

Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost. And when Luke tells the Jesus story, it is from the beginning the disclosure of the just and merciful reign of God's Anointed.

These may be the Messiah's first public words, but even his mother's inspired declarations which preceded have provided a context for grasping the weight of his declaration.

“He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away,” sang Mary (Luke 1:52-53). Now having been anointed by the Holy Spirit in his baptism (Luke 3:22; Acts 10:38) and proved to be more than a match for the devil in his understanding of the obedience required of the Son of God (Luke 4:1-13), Jesus the Messiah declares what it means that he is the Anointed One according to the Word of God. Of course this is a “christological” text since it again identifies Jesus as the Messiah anointed by the Holy Spirit, but this has never been a secret in Luke’s gospel (see 2:11). The question which has been at stake is how the Messiah would rule!

This text becomes dangerous when its literal meaning is taken seriously. As long as it is generally spiritualized, it may stand with all of those grand phrases from the latter chapters of Isaiah in which believers of every age have basked. Like refrains from Handel’s Messiah sung every Advent in Christian churches, these promises of healing, restoration, renewal, and justice were balm to first century Israel, especially under Roman domination. Even the Jubilee notions of the “acceptable year”—when debts would be forgiven, land reform would occur, and liberation would be granted to the oppressed and incarcerated—even these promises were warmly held as general hopes. But what if someone said, “The Messianic age starts now. The reform, renewal, and restoration which everyone was for in general will begin concretely today!”

Then what? Just how much of a challenge to the status quo does this Messiah intend to make? Will this mean debt forgiveness, land reform, and a challenge to unjust imprisonments? What will those in power do to someone who talks like that? What will become of our vested interests if this is actually the program of the kingdom of the Messiah Jesus?

Jesus’ entire sermon on the text is: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” He does not even depend on their response, but like it or not, he has already begun to fulfill it. The hearers and the readers are not merely confronted with a possibility or an abstract ideology to which they may object. They, we (!), are confronted with the Messianic authority of Jesus and the law of God which he enacts.

The law of God is “good news to the poor,” although it may not yet be the “gospel” in the sense of the full depth of the grace of God. But the just law of God is not to be taken lightly, and the Messiah declares that this is the very substance of his whole mission. This is the same Jesus who soon says to his followers, “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20). God’s dominion, which Jesus brings, is a mission, a program, a campaign which is directed first to those with the greatest need, the sinners and outcasts, the sick and the poor (see also 5:32).

By chapter 7, Jesus’ one response to those who come from John asking about him is, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive

their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.” Then he adds, “And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me” (7:22-23). Jesus has already been enacting the very program of the reign of God which he had announced.

The radical gospel of the justification of the ungodly reveals a dynamic and powerful righteousness of God which no one could have anticipated. But it is at least foreshadowed in the gracious justice which God’s Messiah pursues for the poor and outcast in obedience to God’s

Word in the prophets. Even when Jesus' address in Nazareth is read in the light of his later passion and vindication, the literal claim of his announcement is undiminished. In fact, Jesus' death takes on new meaning when it is understood that the program and reign of this "Christ of God, his Chosen One" (23:35) is so clearly stated and rejected in the story. The "good news to the poor" which Jesus declares in Luke 4 discloses the justice of the righteousness of God as surely as the resurrection of Jesus and the proclamation of forgiveness in his name reveals its mercy.

The poor of the world quite rightly see that God and God's Messiah exercise a "preferential option" for them in striking contrast to legal systems and economic arrangements where they are invisible, silenced, or marginalized. The "poor" will prove to be a much larger group in Luke's story than merely those of economic disadvantage, since this is not simply a tale of class struggle. But Lazarus, the rich ruler, and Zacchaeus (Luke 16, 18, 19) are explicit examples which show that "the rich" and "the poor" are not mere euphemisms either. Luke's entire story speaks persistently concerning the significance of economic realities for those who are blessed or threatened by the peculiar priorities of the reign of Jesus.

Luke 4 is a justice text, especially as told by the evangelist. It defines divine justice quite concretely, indicating that Jesus is not merely God's way of being in the world, but Jesus is God's way of ruling the world. It is Jesus who fulfills the law and the prophets by enacting God's standards for justice, which the law and the prophets revealed.

All who are eager to discern God's righteousness at work in the larger world, whether or not they believe in Jesus, may ponder the content of the Isaiah passage which Jesus declares. It is not necessary to be a Christian to be caught up in the program of this reign, and this passage has proved to be a basis for a wide ranging conversation on justice itself as well as a common ground for action. But those who cling to Jesus as Savior and Lord would do well to understand that the justice of his kingdom is filled with consequences for this world and for their role in it. The platform of Jesus' mission and the content of his call to discipleship are filled with God's passion for the outcast, the poor, the oppressed, and the lost.

II. CAN THE RIGHTEOUS BE SAVED?

Something went wrong in Nazareth. The rediscovery of the Messiah's program for justice could turn out to be a cruel hoax, for even the law of God does not produce the justice it commands.

When the first half of the story is read, Jesus the Messiah is discovered to take up the scriptural commands of God as the program of his reign. That

revelation brings all of the justice agenda of the Old Testament forward to the Messiah. It is then impossible to suggest that Jesus was only concerned with salvation for the world to come. Therefore most of the use of this story in liberation theology is focused precisely on the analysis of the justice agenda in Jesus' declaration. This focus requires that all interpreters consider carefully what the concrete implications of "good news to the poor" would be in the present time, and it also stresses that the offense which Jesus caused (and causes!) in the second half of the text may be linked directly with the challenge of his words to an oppressive status quo.

This insight is an important corrective to the rather abstract christological interpretation

of the text which has filled the commentaries. That is, it has long been observed that Jesus' declaration is followed in 4:22 with a series of blandly approving and non-committal remarks until they say, "Is not this Joseph's son?" Then the storm breaks. Of course Luke has been stressing that this Jesus who was the "supposed" son of Joseph (3:23; see also 2:27; 33, 49) was truly the Son of God (1:32, 35; 3:22; 4:3, 9, 41). Thus their question reveals their christological misunderstanding.

After centuries of debate on whether Jesus is truly God and truly human, this passage from Luke has been read to turn on a "christological misunderstanding" concerning Jesus' "nature." It is a question of metaphysics, and the crowd in Nazareth flunked, while orthodox Christians rush in to confess that Jesus is truly the Son of God. Yet the connection between this misunderstanding and the content of Jesus' declaration remains quite vague. But if the "justice agenda" of the Isaiah quotation is kept at the center of the whole encounter, then the "christological" heresy is not about ontology but obedience. Then the "christological misunderstanding" of Jesus' role and authority is focused in the rejection of the reign on earth according to the law of God which this Messiah has inaugurated.

What is at stake in this christological discussion is not merely Jesus' identity, but the messianic authority he is exercising. To be "Son of God" is primarily in Luke to be the one who receives "the throne of his father David" (1:32) and to exercise the dominion of the Messiah (see also 4:41). Thus their question is more than an abstract "christological" misunderstanding. It is an *ad hominem* comment asking, "Who does he think he is?" in order to evade the substance of what Jesus has said. It is a rejection of his authority as Messiah and Son of God strictly on the basis of a refusal to accept the inauguration of God's law which he has declared "Today!"

The intensity of Jesus' attack further illumines their rejection, although the reader only grasps what they are thinking through Jesus' prophetic interpretation. The crowd says nothing more, but Jesus drives home the point of the implicit rejection with emphatic statements. "Doubtless you will quote.... Truly, I say to you.... But in truth, I tell you" (4:23-24). Then the prophetic precedents from Elijah and Elisha declare that the hope and promise of the "good news to the poor" has turned into indictment for them and blessing only for others. Their rejection of his rule now thoroughly exposed, the crowd is intent on killing him.

The Messiah's program for justice is a revelation of the righteousness of God, but its effects on the people of God are tragic. This law, like any other, always accuses "the righteous." Sinners may be called to repentance. The alien, the outsider, the excluded, the Gentiles may go dancing into the kingdom. But the elect, the righteous, those who are well (and well off) discover that the justice of God convicts them of injustice, and Jesus does not spare the indictment of those who had been blessed to have had him grow up in their midst. He does not invoke this wonderful text of promise as a pastoral word of blessing to the blessed. Instead, in a *tour de force*, Jesus declares it to be a disclosure of divine justice that stands over against these righteous folk in the synagogue exposing their rejection of God's rule.

The story has taken a tragic turn, anticipated only in Simeon's prior oracle that "this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel and for a sign that is spoken against...that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed" (2:34). This is not an anti-Jewish polemic as if "the Jews" were worse sinners than all others. It is rather a revelation that the just law of God indicts the

righteous because it is uncompromising in its literal clarity and absolute in its claim.

Proper religious people of every generation cannot justify themselves at the expense of the congregation in Nazareth, for they will then only find that they are included in the story. The justice of God is a scandal to those whom the world reputes to be the righteous, especially the self-righteous. Furthermore the justice agenda of this Messiah is impossibly demanding of people who are hoping to contribute from their resources but have no intention of losing control. When Luke's Jesus says, "Blessed are you poor," and "Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me" (6:20; 7:23), he is not saying two things, but one.

The poor of the world can see quite clearly that Jesus' program for the kingdom offends the prosperous. Both his inaugural speech in Nazareth and his sermon on the plain (6:17-49) have the same excruciating effect on those who have so often been told to "count your many blessings, name them one by one." "Woe to you that are rich," declares the Messiah, "for you have received your reward" (6:24).

On the other hand, this is not simply a story of class struggle or reversal as if to say that "the poor" have now ascended above criticism or beyond sin. These are words of benediction and malediction spoken by the Messiah directly to "you poor" and "you rich," identifying the effect that the kingdom has on each. But neither has a status over against God. Thus when the Sandinistas post the billboard which declares "We have no God but the God of the poor!," the slogan could be recited as a confession, even a proper Christian confession. But beware of all attempts to set conditions on God or to use God's promises for political advantage or to domesticate God's righteousness to prevailing ideologies or economic theories. God's reign declares its own standards of benefaction for the poor, and the Messiah pursues this program in surprising and non-coercive ways.

The righteousness of God is at work in the reign of the Messiah, and Jesus' reign draws its criteria for justice straight from the scriptural heritage of Israel, the law and the prophets. It is a declaration which renews the hope of the poor,

and their experience of injustice and oppression becomes a proving ground for the command and promise of God. Those who have never counted themselves worthy of God's grace, benefits, or justice are simply amazed and delighted to discover the Messiah's priority for the sick, the sinners, the poor, and the aliens. They now become the apostles and prophets of God's command and promise of justice, and they claim the divinely given right to be treated according to the law of the Messiah. Like Jesus they simply point to the text and focus on its contents. Nothing more needs to be added. Land reform, debt forgiveness, wrongful imprisonments, adequate health care, freedom from oppression. Is not this God's will?

But the effect of this renewal of divine law is not immediate salvation, either in first century Palestine or now. The people who observed all righteousness by attending the synagogue, listening to the Scriptures, and keeping the precepts found themselves excluded. They did not receive salvation but judgment, and their attempts to kill the Messiah exposed their wickedness. Even now the wealthy and powerful are so often preoccupied with the struggle against "Godless communism" that they react in anger or murder, even when the oppressed call out for justice in the name of Jesus. People who have been richly blessed appear to be tragically caught in needing to prove their right to what they have and to justify their existence even at great cost.

And the poor? The Messiah has now assigned the blessings of the righteous to those who were once regarded as condemned. But did they receive the salvation, the liberation which the Messiah announced? Yes, in part, because the Messiah then proceeded to the task. But in the end? Was this only a botched effort in which those regarded as righteous were simply pitted against the poor until the Messiah was killed? And what then became of the righteousness of God? Where was the justice and the liberation then? Can the “righteous” be saved and the poor be liberated by a crucified Messiah?

III. JUSTIFICATION AND JUSTICE

No easy answers may be allowed to resolve the questions which confront the righteous reign of the Messiah Jesus. The issues at stake are too crucial to the truth of the gospel, and the concerns are too immediate to human life to be obscured in theoretical debate. The “heralds of a new reformation” have insisted that Jesus’ sermon in Nazareth places the issues of justice for the poor at the heart of the kingdom which this Messiah of God inaugurated. Yet unless the depth of the justice and mercy of the righteousness of God is sounded, Jesus’ reign may only prove to be an indictment or an illusion.

Luke’s gospel story supports this sharpening of the matter because it refuses to allow Jesus’ reign to become only an otherworldly reality and yet faces the crisis which Jesus provoked in Israel. Only Luke stresses that when Jesus died, he was ironically confirmed as truly “the righteous one” (23:47; see also Acts 3:14). Jesus is not merely a good or innocent person who was unfortunately crucified. He is both the proclaimer and the agent of the righteous reign of God. The content of God’s justice, the good news to the poor, is rejected by those who put this “Christ of God” to death.

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Yet Luke has recognized that the story of Jesus is more than an indictment of the complicity of the righteous in the forces of death and injustice. It is that, and it brings a prophetic word of condemnation. Even the declaration that God raised Jesus from the dead emphasizes the confrontation with God’s righteous reign which takes place in Jesus’ death: “God has made him both Lord and Christ,” says Peter at Pentecost, “this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). Humanity has confronted God’s call for justice with an execution aimed at silencing the prophet, putting God’s justice to the test, and now God has vindicated this Messiah and his mission of justice and mercy, putting humanity on notice. Small wonder that terror is struck in the hearts of those who hear that Jesus has been vindicated.

But in vindicating Jesus, God is not vindictive. The righteousness of God finally proves to be exercised in the call to repentance and the giving of repentance unto forgiveness of sins to Israel and all the nations. God justifies the ungodly, even those self-righteous and pious and powerful and wealthy people who had turned out to be complicit in Jesus’ death. The depth of the justice of God is only sounded when its mercy and reconciliation are perceived. The righteous reign of God’s Messiah is not merely an indictment of all flesh, driving sinful humanity to depend on God’s grace. It is also a means of salvation wrought of God’s purpose, and Jesus who declares and inaugurates the fulfillment of God’s law is exalted to dominion in heaven as well as on earth.

The justification of the ungodly again proves to be a strategy of divine justice on earth as

well as the means of salvation for the world to come. In fact, we who know that we are justified by grace through faith also live in the expectant confidence of Christ's reign of justice and mercy over all the earth. And because we no longer need to justify ourselves, rich and poor, wicked and righteous, before God and each other, we are restored to one another as neighbors, as justified sinners. And for what? For serving one another, for caring for the other's rights ahead of our privileges.

Indeed, the justice agenda of God's righteous rule is itself restored to us as the calling and commission we share with all other people on earth, good news to the poor, release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, liberty for the oppressed, and the year of the Lord's Jubilee. Secure in the knowledge that our righteousness is an alien righteousness, we are free from the need to prove ourselves to be righteous or even to defend our rights to the promises of God. And we are free to listen to the prophetic words which Isaiah, the Messiah Jesus, and the "heralds of a new reformation" are declaring to us about the justice and mercy which God's kingdom is pursuing, today.