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Jesus' mission statement (Lk 4:16-30)

Introduction: a mission statement for Jesus?

By definition, to be a Christian is to try to follow Christ and to conform one's own life to his. This is partly why so many people have tried to describe the center of Jesus' life, ministry and mission. If we can understand what made Jesus tick, we could know what Christianity is all about. Different centers have been identified depending on the Biblical text chosen. One good text to use is Lk 4:16-30, since it is probably the text which resembles most what we would call today a "mission statement."

((The passage is part of the introduction to the ministry of Jesus and follows the summary of the beginning of the ministry in verses 14 and 15.))

When Jesus comes back to Nazareth, where he grew up, he goes to the synagogue and reads passages from Isaiah (61:1-2 and 58:6) associated with the Messiah with reference to the year of the Jubilee. After reading the text, Jesus states that this Scripture is fulfilled, clearly in his own person and ministry, so Jesus describes his own mission in light of the Jubilee.

Of course, even without knowing much about the Jubilee, it is clear that it is a symbol of salvation and deliverance, but to better understand Jesus' mission it is helpful to refer to the OT to understand this institution.

The Jubilee

Here I will briefly summarize what you can read in Lev 25 on the law of the Jubilee. According the Lev 25, during the Jubilee, which was supposed to occur every 50 years, every slave was supposed to be freed, the lands were supposed to lay fallow, debts were to be canceled, and the lands and houses which had been sold had to be returned to their original owners. I

use the conditional because there is no evidence that this law was ever practiced in ancient Israel. Considering that the prophets regularly complain of the injustice and the oppression of the poor, the accumulation of lands and houses by the rich and the usurious rates charged on loans, it seems unlikely that such a progressive law as the Jubilee would have been practiced.

Whether it was practiced or not, such a law had the goal to avoid that families would lose land for more than a generation to insure to all a mean of wealth production in an agrarian economy like Israel.

Not only the land, but the Israelites themselves could not become owned permanently (as slaves) and were to be released on the Jubilee. The main way of becoming a slave in these days was defaulting on loans. A slave could be freed by a family member who had the money to do so, but for those who didn't get rescued, there was the Jubilee, which allowed the freeing of **all** slaves. Again, this ensured that when a family fell on hard times, it would not last more than a generation.

The Jubilee is an interesting concept, when we consider that so often even in our society, financial misery is something often passed from one generation to the other. Though it wouldn't be easy to apply in our world, this idea of the next generation always recovering freedom and a land, a mean of production, is a pretty interesting way of breaking the cycle of poverty.

Salvation

So, that's the Jubilee, and this is what Jesus used to describe his mission and the salvation he was bringing to the world. But isn't it a bit funny that salvation is associated with the Jubilee, something which has a lot to do with the economy and social justice? Isn't Jesus supposed to save our

soul, to save us from sin, from death, from God's wrath, or something more spiritual?

It depends what borders we choose for the concept of "salvation." In the Bible, "salvation" is a much broader concept than in most Christian's mind. In the OT, God is often described as the savior and liberator of the poor and the oppressed, in the psalms for example (35 and 40, etc.). In the time of the judges, God raised up "saviors" who delivered the people from military oppressors. There is often a military side to the deliverance of God, from the slavery in Egypt, to the captivity in Babylon.

Even in the Roman Empire in which Jesus lived, the concept of "salvation" was very widely used to describe social, economic and military dimensions. The Roman Emperor was called the *soter*, the savior. It isn't benign when in the Gospels Jesus is called "savior": it is a criticism of the kind of salvation offered by the Emperor.

Jesus' salvation in the Gospels isn't just preoccupied by the souls. It is a full restoration of the whole human being. Of course, the physical healings are a testimony to that. These healings often not only restore the physical being, but the social and religious status as well, allowing the person healed to participate once more in the life of his or her people.

By using in Luke 4 the image of the Jubilee, Jesus is referring to the global salvation he will bring to people, including their physical and spiritual needs. Jesus proclaims deliverance to the poor, that is to all those in need or experiencing difficulties.

More than a mission statement

This description of Jesus' mission in Luke 4 is not a fluke. In Matthew, Jesus' mission is summarized in similar terms. Let us read

Mt 11:2-5. When John the Baptist is wondering if Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus replies that the blind are seeing, the lame walk, the lepers are healed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Jesus here is using different texts from Isaiah (26:19 ; 29:18-19 ; 35:5-6 ; 61:1). He is saying: this is my work. Do you think this is Messiah work? John has to question his understanding of the Messiah and of his mission. Perhaps John had, like most people in his time, too narrow, too nationalistic or militaristic a conception of the Messiah. But Jesus is inaugurating God's reign not by throwing out the Romans but by delivering the oppressed, healing the sick and taking care of those in need, restoring them to their full humanity. When we read the Gospels, this weird mission statement of Lk 4 does seem to be at the center of Jesus' ministry. The healings and miracles of Jesus aim at alleviating the suffering of the sick, of course, but they seem also to demonstrate not just Jesus' power, but the kind of Messiah-savior he is: the Lord of life, who has dominion over life and death, over health and sickness, over angels and demons. What Jesus is saying, is that he has come to establish God's reign, which will replace the reign of men. Oppression and injustice will be replaced by God's justice and blessing.

This is central to Jesus' mission. The lowering of the mighty and rich and the raising up of the poor and oppressed is an integral part of Jesus' mission, as other passages like the beatitudes (Lk 6:20-26) and Mary's Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55) underline.

We have to recognize how radical statements like these were in the 1st century context. They are dangerously close to revolutionary, and could be deemed treason by the Roman authorities, since they are criticisms of the roman world, a very hierarchical and patriarchal world, where the domination of the strongest was the way of life. When Mary proclaims these

words, Cesar Augustus is at the top of the pyramid that is the Roman world. He is served by all and has become one of the richest man of Antiquity. But Mary, paving the way for Jesus' ministry, states that God "has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty."

And Jesus, who was born in misery, follows and says things like: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God (...) but woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort," (Lk 6:20.24) and "Who is greater? The one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves" (Lk 22:27) or "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave" (Mt 20:26). Jesus reverses the roman social order.

Much of Jesus' project in setting up a different community, the community of God's reign, is to create a new social order. As the Gospels show repeatedly, the apostles themselves will have the hardest time to accept this reversal of the social order, and I would say that for most of its history, the Church has had the hardest time to take seriously this aspect of Jesus' teaching. Jesus' social teachings are just too radical for us. And yet, the reversal of the social order preached by Jesus is at the core of the ethics of God's reign, and at the core of Jesus' mission.