

## Unrolling the Scroll

- Red Mass
- September 28, 2016
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

We gather in this annual Red Mass of our region at the opening of the judicial season. We gather as judges, lawyers, legal educators, legislators, public servants, and other elected and appointed officials. We come into this space which aids reflection by its very shape and we come together with one another which helps us to confirm our common purpose. We come at the start of something new in order to take stock of how we are, what is most important to us, and what inspires us for the coming year.

How will the judicial year unroll; how will the legal and legislative year unroll; how will our municipal life unroll; how will our state and national political life unroll; how will the legal education of this School of Law unroll? Let me suggest to you that it might be useful to think of what lies ahead as a scroll and that what today is about is the opening and unrolling of that scroll.

You may have read last week that computer scientists have been successful in virtually unrolling and reading a charred Hebrew scripture parchment scroll which is 2,000 years old and which was found in a synagogue by the Dead Sea. Never had this been done before; new technology makes it possible.

In our gospel reading we find ourselves in another first century synagogue, this time in Nazareth, and another parchment scroll is handed to Jesus who has grown up in that town, who has learned to read in that very synagogue, and to the amazement of his villagers has created excitement in the region by his teaching with authority and his deeds of power on behalf of the poor and outcasts. This synagogue is a simple place of teaching and learning at the heart of the village. When Jesus stood up to read, as he would often have done, the synagogue leader handed him the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah. Jesus unrolled it, searched and found what he wanted to read, and recited:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.

In unrolling the scroll Jesus has gone searching for the prisoners, the blind, the oppressed, the exploited, the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the burdened, the day laborers, the migrants, the orphans, the widows, the foreigners in sum, the poor. He has found them and they have come tumbling like letters out of that scroll where they had been wrapped and hidden. He went looking for them among all the rolled layers of law and ritual and war and vision and exile and history and hope. They were there and he revealed them, as it were called them forth, from the text of the scroll. He announced in that synagogue that he was anointed by the spirit of God to proclaim glad tidings, liberty, sight, freedom, and the kind of year acceptable to God to those poor who came tumbling from the unrolled scroll. So Jesus of Nazareth, in the teaching place of his hometown, went and found two things in the scroll: the poor and himself. These are whom

God is about he said, and this is what I am about, he claimed. The scroll of the scriptures had been unrolled. The scroll of who he was and what he was about was unrolled. In finding them, he found himself. In claiming who he was, he claimed them.

Perhaps you read the recent column by Nicholas Kristof, “What Religion Would Jesus Belong to?” (NYT 9/4/16) asking where the founders of religions—like Jesus or Muhammad—if they were to come back, would find their religious inspirations and purpose now alive. In what community; in what religion; in what work? That question is like unrolling the scroll of how centuries and cultures wrap religions. Jesus would today find himself wherever there are glad tidings, liberty, sight, freedom, and a life acceptable to God for the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed of today.

Evidently I am suggesting in this Red Mass that as we ask how the year ahead will unroll for all of us that we too go searching for the persons in our scroll of responsibility—the poor in all their many forms and ourselves in our truth. Do the poor come tumbling out of our scroll as we unroll it and do we fall out with them as their light and freedom and glad tidings?

Let me digress just a moment and then roll up the scroll of these remarks. Jesus read aloud from a scroll of parchment. We read silently from a computer screen and we scroll down to whatever place we wish. If we skip back from Google to Gutenberg we go from digitized bytes to paper, heft, ink, binding, and tactile text. Walter Isaacson has a delightful teaser about this development.

Imagine if we'd been getting all of our information on electronic screens for four hundred years, and then some modern-day Gutenberg came along and took the words and pictures and put them onto nicely designed pages that we could read in the bathtub or bus or backyard. We might even declare that paper was such a good technology it would replace the internet someday. (American Sketches, pp. 19-20)

Then if we go from Gutenberg back we go to monks in monasteries copying texts by hand on rare volumes with wild illuminations to warn off devils and invite angels. Still more hands-on; still more tactile. If we then go back to about the year 380 we find Augustine, one of the most educated persons of his age, a rhetorician, philosopher and teacher, meeting Ambrose of Milan for the first time. When Augustine encounters Ambrose he finds him reading. Augustine is dumbfounded, because Ambrose is not moving his lips and is making no sound as he reads. Augustine had never seen anyone who had the capacity to read mentally—which we take for granted—rather than verbally, aloud, with sound. As we go back we find the more hands-on, the more bodily, the more humanly concrete, the less purely mental or abstract. Then finally there is our text of today and of Isaiah, the sacred scrolls, the most hands-on of all. It's a very long human journey from the sacred scroll to scrolling down on a computer screen. Much is gained. Perhaps something slips out.

Is it possible that as our professions also as we progress in their complexity, what can slip out all too easily for us is the concrete, the person, the hands-on individual in his or her need and bodily reality, the poor of the many specific kinds of our day and of our hometown? We can become too mental, too abstract, too removed, too virtual? The Jesuit leader of our region has asked each

of us Jesuits—whoever we are as teachers, or administrators, or pastoral ministers—to spend two hours a week with the poor. He knows how our lives can get abstracted by the forces of our responsibility from the poor who tumbled from the scroll Jesus unrolled and with whom he identified himself as his purpose.

We ask in this Red Mass for a blessing on the year ahead unrolling for each of us and for all of us together. May this year also be a blessing through us for the poor of our professions and lives.