

3 February 2019
Fourth Sunday of Epiphany
St Luke 4: 21 - 30

This morning's lesson is a continuation of the Gospel passage from last Sunday. You will recall that after travelling through the small cities and farming and fishing villages in Galilee, Jesus returned to His hometown of Nazareth. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue, and the president spotted him and asked him to read from the scrolls. That part we understand because sometimes in the past, when we had a visiting priest or deacon we invited them to proclaim the Gospel, or in the case of a deacon, give the dismissal.

I think we are fairly safe and saying that is what we saw occurring last Sunday.

Jesus read from Isaiah, then without giving his interpretation of the passage, sat down. After a long pause, with everyone wondering what would happen next, he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

We mentally push the pause button, reflect, and so far, everything is going well. He gets a favourable response from the others. "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth."

They asked, "isn't this Joseph's son?". Yes, of course. Joseph the carpenter who married Mary, and years ago there was a lot of prattle and talk about how soon Jesus had been born after the couple had married, and how they had gone off somewhere - that flight into Egypt - before they returned. But all of that was in the past, and Jesus had done well in life. He hadn't stayed a carpenter like everyone expected, but even so, he had done well in life.

And there is the problem. They saw him only as Jesus the son of Joseph. They did not know him as we have come to know him - Jesus the true and only Son of God. Perhaps they had never heard that before; perhaps they had heard but didn't understand. What ever the reason, what Jesus told them next was very troubling to them. As long as Jesus stayed within the confines of the box the hometown folks had created for him, all was well and good.

But it wasn't all and good for very long because Jesus changed the conversation, and it did not take his fellow worshippers to catch on to the meaning of his words. Plus, he made it all the more intense when he pointed out that prophets are welcome everywhere except in their own home town.

I think the others present that morning were asking, maybe even daring, for Jesus to prove himself. All right, show us what you have been doing. Seeing is believing, so show us something good and we'll believe you.

Instead, of all the stories of the two great Old Testament prophets, Elijah and Elisha, the Lord picks the two stories where these men cared for foreign people and performed miracles among non-Jews. And that is what set them off. They were angry, and mob mentality took over, and they marched him out the door to a cliff where they intended to throw him down to his death. St Luke doesn't provide us with the details, but concludes this story with Jesus walking away.

This passage has very important implications for the modern world, for the divisiveness we find between various groups that seek to exclude others. Jesus made it clear, God does not serve special interests; but loves all people who seek to love and serve him and care for other people. God doesn't see the artificial divisions of nation or zip code, of language or accent, or pigment or gender.

Do you remember the song we learned in Sunday school - Jesus loves me this I know, for the bible tells me so. We are weak but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. For adults or even older children who are too full of self pride, it seems like they must sing a bit louder on the last three words - Jesus loves ME!. Yes, Jesus does - and others just as much.

There was another song we probably learned: Jesus loves the little children; all the children of the world, and it goes on to remind us that all children, regardless of their race, are precious in his sight.

Or a third song from our early years, one that we sometimes sing as adults during Epiphany: Go Tell it on the Mountain. I prefer the Bob Marley version because it ends with the final refrain of freedom - let my people go. As Roy Rogers would later sing - don't fence me in.

The people in the synagogue that day in Nazareth didn't understand Jesus because they were too close, too immediate to Jesus and could see him as the son of Joseph and not much beyond that. From a perspective of 2000 years, we have a broader understanding.

God's love is universal - all people. Jesus does not serve special interest groups. Yet, tragically and wickedly, there are still those who seek to box Jesus into a container of their own making.

Jesus is not a card-carrying member of any political party. In fact, He said almost nothing about politics, government, and public policy. He is not holding the birth certificate from any country. And I am very certain He did not endorse, much less write, any book encouraging people to patronize self-proclaimed businesses to boost their profit.

We can be certain that Jesus grew up hearing the message in the 6th chapter of the minor prophet, Micah - do good, be kind, and walk humbly before God. Very simply, people who believed by fiat of their religion or anything else, are deserving of God's special attention and care are not humble. They are filled with pride, and it is the type of pride that is misplaced because it leads an erroneous sense of superiority and entitlement.

We see this theme repeating itself in different forms. After Andrew had spent a day with Jesus, he couldn't wait to find his brother and tell him that he had met the Lord, and to come and see. But his brother looked at him and sarcastically asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

On the whole, our pride and arrogance that is truly a mirror image of those people from Nazareth who were at the synagogue that day, have done more harm than we can begin to imagine. The harm done to individuals who have been excluded, dismissed and shut out, is hideous. But beyond that, when we reject their gifts, like the people rejected the power of Jesus, we have deprived ourselves of things beyond our imagination. How many potential Nobel Prize winners who might have developed the cure for cancer or found a way to stop global warming, economics, writers, and others never came home from wars started by powerful men who wanted more power? How many others never had a chance to help improve the world because they were discriminated over their religion, race, gender, or something else?

When one individual is hurt, all are hurt.

And when we honour and uphold the dignity of all God's children, when we shred the boxes into which we want to put them, when we don't fence them in, then we are all blessed.

The folks at the synagogue that day missed it all. But St Luke captured the story, so that you and I do not continue repeating their mistake.