

27 January 2019

St Luke 4: 14 - 21

Third Sunday of Epiphany

The witty author and television host David Frost once explained how Harold MacMillan lost the British parliamentary election in 1963. MacMillan had been a decorated soldier in World War One, served with Churchill during the second war, and was a thoughtful, astute man, and the owner of a publishing house that bore his name. Still, he was turned out of office because he told his constituents, "We've never had it so good." That message caused an immediate reaction when his opponents jumped on it by telling their constituents to think again and are things really that good? They turned the conversation from positive to negative, believing that people would rather hear bad news and talk about misery and suffering that so much as reluctantly admit conditions and their lives were better.

There is nothing new about that. In Greek mythology Cassandra was a mystic who like the Sybil of the Oracle at Delphi gave prophetic messages of the future. For the most part, the people listened in fear at the negative ones - not that they always followed her advice, but they listened. And, for the most part, they discounted and rejected anything that was good and positive.

Jesus ran into the same problem in our Gospel lesson for this morning. St Luke tells us that after travelling through the small communities in the region of Galilee he returned home and on the Sabbath day went to his own synagogue. He was honoured by being asked to read the lesson for today - which, as we read in our passage - He did. At first everyone was impressed. He was the hometown boy who had enjoyed a successful career. But then he broke the precedent because the expectation is that he would make a few comments. In short, a sermon, or his interpretation of the passage.

Instead, he sat down, and that left everyone wondering what was going on. Perhaps, some of them thought Jesus didn't know all that was expected of the reader. Perhaps they thought he might have had stage fright. Or, perhaps he had nothing to say. Those of you who remember Father Jim Curtis will recall that on some Sundays he would read the Gospel and then say, "We'll let it speak for itself."

After what must have been a long and uneasy silence, Jesus simply said, Today this has been fulfilled in your hearing. In other words, it has happened and continues to happen. Prisoners are released, the poor are fed and clothed, the sick are being healed. Look around, and see what is happening, and see what I have been doing to help make it happen.

Now, we don't read the next portion of St Luke's gospel this morning, but the results were not pretty. The silence that met with their initial confusion became silence of bewilderment. Then came the whispering, and eventually raised voices. The people were angry and marched Jesus out of their synagogue to a hill and were prepared to throw him off the cliff and kill him for such heresy.

They simply could not, and would not, take time to consider anything that was good news. But then, when we think about the toxic climate of today, that seems to be human nature, and in many ways, helped along by the social media and internet, it is a frequent and toxic situation. It happens on an international level all the way down to individuals, and then back up again. It's a pity, because when we close our heart and mind to good things, or when we look only too closely in what is happening right now, we miss out on most of the good news. When we dwell on the negative, our thoughts become our words and actions.

I was first exposed to that in seminary when a classmate was complaining that the Anglican Communion was moving too slowly. Our professor looked at us and said, the church has been around for 1900 years, so just why do you think it should set its agenda according to your impatience?

Our professor went on to explain that the history of Christianity can be depicted in a giant sine wave that doesn't flow perfectly smoothly from peaks to lows and back again. It's uneven, but a series of growth and decline that always rights itself from one extreme or another.

The danger is to neglect or reject history and become fixated on what in our modern culture is often called "What Is Trending Now". It is dangerous because we do not look at the broad perspective, and cannot see God's grace and divine protection.

For those of you who lived in the bad old days of cars with huge tailfins, a bench front seat, and no seatbelts, perhaps you remember sitting next to the driver. You watched them hold on to the wheel, and driving a car didn't look all that tough. Perhaps your parents allowed you to sit on their lap and also hold the wheel. That was dangerous enough, but the sine wave of life taught we were not really driving - and for good reason. What's Trending Now would say we had our hands on the wheel and in control.

That was brought home again in a chapter in a fascinating book entitled the Clock of the Long Now. The authors said that we have become accustomed to thinking of now as this particular day, hour, and even second. Instead, we should think of our 'now' as extending back several generations to the era of our grandparents, and perhaps even their parents. And, because each of us will have a tremendous influence in our own little region of the world, extend out another couple of generations.

All of us have a long heritage that dates back several generations, and generally people are so influenced by their parents that, in time, we really do become much like our mother and father. Our work may be different, our finances might be very different, perhaps we have moved hundreds of miles from where we grew up - but inside, in our heart and mind and personality, we are still connected to the past.

In time, we will pass away, but part of us will live on in the spiritual and emotional DNA of those around us - family members, neighbours, and so on. Very likely, it will be for several more generations.

That same principle, I believe, applies to a parish family.

This past year we just observed our 150th anniversary. The fact that this parish has survived for a century and a half is not exactly rare or unusual, but all things considered, it puts an emphasis on perseverance. And when we looked at the past and saw those 30 years when All Saints' was in hibernation, it is all the more significant. During those 150 years there were many challenges, but some very good things happened. We could either focus on the negative and disheartening, the mistakes and the problems, or focus on God's presence constantly in our lives and constantly leading us forward.

That same principle applies as we look to the future. Will you look for the positive or for the negative? Those are the first, basic, and most serious and challenging questions which we face. From there, we build our lives that can either be a blessing or a curse to God, to the people around us, and ultimately to the wider world.

It's incredibly easy to be like the men who heard Jesus that day. Almost anyone, with a minimum of effort can surrender to what can only be described as the dark side of negativity

It takes courage to remain positive and to embrace the good things that happen to us. And that sort of courage, for you and me, comes from a faith and trust in Jesus. It takes this divine assistance to go against the toxic negativity in our world, and true spiritual discernment to see God's handiwork in both the best and worst of all situations and even more important - in all people