

Epiphany 4C
St. Luke 4:21-30
January 31, 2016
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

Familiar People, Familiar Words

"When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way."

The truth hurts. It can burn the ears when heard. It can burn the tongue when spoken. We especially don't want to hear a hard truth about us or our lives. It is easier to live a little longer with a delusion, ignoring the truth and reality.

When Jesus spoke a hard truth to the people of Nazareth, they could not hear it. Not only couldn't they hear it, they became enraged at his words.

What is a hard truth? A hard truth is a truth we want to avoid, a truth we would like to deny. Yet on some level, deep inside, we know it is true even before we hear the words. We fear the truth, because confronting the truth will be unpleasant, or may force us to change ourselves or our way of thinking. We would prefer the status quo.

The truth in Nazareth this morning is that the folks from Jesus' home town did not want to see Him as more than just one of the

common folks, *someone special*. His words and voice may have sounded beautiful until they were confronted with the reality that they did not want to hear what he was saying, or until they desired to diminish those words and those hard truths because familiarity with the speaker breeds a kind of contempt. How could this carpenter, the son of a carpenter, speak prophetically, critically of the society in which they lived? What gives him the right?

Jesus provoked them by indicating that the words of prophets of old often fell on deaf ears, or that the power of those words was diluted by the problem of familiarity breeding contempt. The Nazarenes wanted to hear what others were hearing from Jesus. But it was not possible for them to move beyond the familiarity they shared with Jesus to see him as the chosen one, the Messiah come to God's people Israel.

Hard truths abound in life on a regular basis. We can live in denial about them, resist them, *kill or discount the messenger* when these truths are verbalized to us. But we may do so at our own peril! How often have we been told by friends and physicians to cease engaging in habits which are harmful to us?

I know I have done this myself. I hear what I want to hear, and do what I want to do, without regard to the wisdom and truths shared with me. This has put my health in peril. I have had the opportunity to speak the truth to others about their health. I have watched as medical professionals have spoken to other people, warning them to improve their habits and health, yet for some reason, maybe my familiarity with the truth, I cannot hear it and apply it to myself. And we do this at our own peril.

Now is the time to hear the truth and act. We must resist the inclination to run the messenger and the truth out of town as the Nazarene's did so long ago. There is nothing new in what they did.

Now is the time to abide the truth. This could never be more true than in our spiritual lives.

Notice what Jesus did. He did not allow them to toss him over a cliff. He simply walked right through the midst of them, giving them one last chance to embrace the truth, and then he was gone. Jesus walks through the midst of our lives, but do we heed the words he has spoken to us?

You have heard me say it before: Familiarity breeds contempt. Let me also say, Familiarity breeds complacency. And another way of seeing complacency is continuing where you are at and ignoring the warnings and the red flags. Again, when we do that, we are moving forward at our own peril. It is like those scenes in many movies (and only in movies I hope) where you see the sign, *"Warning-Road Closed"*, and then they drive ahead anyway, only to come to a bridge, which is out, or the end of the road where it terminates at a cliff. Ignoring the warnings comes at our own peril.

Many come to that *"Road Closed"* sign and think, *'that doesn't apply to me.'* *'I will be able to move ahead without any trouble.'* We can sit and laugh at the actors on the movie screen, or we can watch them in horror, but what of the road closed signs in our own life?

When we become too familiar with the message or the messenger, we think, *"Yeah, Yeah, Yeah,"* and we no longer process the power of what is being said in our minds. The truth we need to

appropriate is right in front of us, but we simply procrastinate about hearing it because it has lost some of its power, or we put it off to another day, supposing we have plenty of time to make the changes it forebodes. And usually the warning which comes around to us is about common everyday situations and habits run amuck: trouble at work from our reaction to being too crisp and burnt-out; deteriorating relationships in our lives which could be saved but are allowed to decay and die. And of course, there are the common human habits run amuck: impulse spending into debt; overeating into serious health problems; smoking until we can't breathe; and drinking into addictive patterns. These are all as common as the salt on the roads and our tables, and we become so familiar with these things, that we fail to hear the truth in the prophetic warning words and signs in our lives and we become complacent about them: *I will do something about that tomorrow or next week! But **now** is the time before we miss the opportunity **now** is affording us and it passes!*

We cannot stand in judgment of the Nazarenes. *We are the Nazarenes.* Our challenge spiritually is not to run God out of our lives or put God off for another day, but rather to embrace the truth that God speaks in our hearts, and to thank the messenger for the gift he brings us.

Spiritually we become familiar with the words of our common prayers or the oft-heard passages in scripture. Yet as often as we hear those words, they have something new to speak to us. There are multifaceted diamonds with an infinite variety of light to shine upon us. It's like the words of the **Lord's Prayer**: So familiar that we can rattle it off in seconds, yet so profound that it would take a lifetime to explore its facets and meaning.

Spiritual familiarity and complacency: So, for example, I have been hurt badly by several people in my past life. So shall I harbor and nurture that anger in my heart and refuse to forgive them, or shall I heed the words of Jesus commanding me to forgive others, "*forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us?*" Are those mere empty words because we have become so familiar with them? Do they not speak to our hearts still? Shall I continue to exploit my anger against those who have *trespassed* against me, with desires for revenge, or shall I acknowledge my complicity in the wrong, and my own responsibility for what happened?

Spiritually, forgiveness is connected to love, and this love is the love of which St. Paul spoke this morning. *[I Corinthians 13:1-13] There is hardly a passage in Scripture with words more familiar. It is easy to love those who love you. I love my family. I love my friends. I love my spouse or my girlfriend or boyfriend. It is easy for love to be patient and kind in these circumstances. What is not easy is to love the unlovable: to love your enemies; to love those who have hurt you and to turn the other cheek. Spiritually, true forgiveness begins with the act of love. And if you can't love, try and pray for them, because you will find that you simply can't pray for someone unless you learn to love them, and if you love them, the doorway to forgiveness opens in your heart. There is nothing, not one thing in this life that is beyond the possibility of such spiritual change for the sake of and because of the power of love. To cut someone off from your love forever is only to cut your own nose off despite your face. Hatred and anger are cancers like the other bad habits we mentioned before. They are insidious and one day, they sneak up and bite you.

Friends, let us not be like the Nazarenes and allow Jesus to pass through our midst. Grab onto his robe and invite Him to stay

awhile. Don't get so familiar with His words that they lose the power of His message to you and your heart. AMEN