

Luke 4 21-30 30/01/2022

- 1) In the passage before this, Jesus has been baptized, has overcome the temptations in the wilderness, and has returned to the synagogue of his childhood in Nazareth. He reads from the prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

Then he declares to the people of Nazareth, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

- 2) The people of Nazareth start off liking Jesus’ message. Who wouldn’t? Good news to the poor, release to the captive, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and divine favour all sound good and right. It did to the people of Nazareth. They are unanimous in their opinion of Jesus. “All spoke well of him.” Jesus had been doing all these things, performing miracles around Galilee and the neighbouring towns and news of it had no doubt reached Nazareth.

And the crowd wants Jesus to do the same miracles in Nazareth that he did in Capernaum. There may be some rivalry between the towns but most likely the people of Nazareth feel that the hometown son should show them special favour and consideration, especially if he is the messenger and fulfillment of such good news.

But Jesus makes it clear that he won’t be a prophet who serves the special interests of his hometown but rather a messenger of good news for the whole world and especially the vulnerable.

- 3) They liked what Jesus was saying, until they didn’t: until Jesus reminded them that Elijah passed over all the hungry widows of Israel to feed a widow outside of Israel;
 - 4) until Jesus reminded them that Elisha passed over all the lepers in Israel to heal a foreign leper, an outsider from Syria of all places; until they recognized that Jesus was passing over them, his hometown people. For Jesus to proclaim grace to lepers and widows was a pretty big deal. But that wasn’t all. Not only was he talking about the outcast, the sinner, the shamed and the shameful, he was talking about people outside of the Jewish circle. Jesus was saying that, just like the prophets Elijah and Elisha had showed, foreigners to Israel were welcome to the grace of God, too.
- 5) Then the hometown crowd is full of anger, and as a group they rise up and try to kill him (v. 29).

I wonder what’s behind that rage. What set them off? Remember that these are the people with whom Jesus grew up. They are his hometown people. They know him and his family. And not only that, they are religious people. They’re the ones who have come to the synagogue today. They’re the ones with whom Jesus worshipped, prayed, and studied scriptures. And now they drive him out of town and want to “hurl him off the cliff.”

- 6) It's one thing to care for others but, as the saying goes, "charity begins at home." That's what the people are thinking and Jesus knows it. Jesus said to them 'surely you will quote this proverb to me; physician heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum'. The people in the synagogue saw themselves as special and they are not happy when they realize that Jesus won't play to their presumed privilege and that they are being passed over. That's what enrages them. They are full of rage about being passed over.
- 7) We probably don't feel the impact of what Jesus is saying as intensely as did the people of Nazareth but I wonder if it might have sounded something like this. "Of all the jobless Christians in Britain during the economic collapse, the prophet of God was sent to none of them except a Muslim refugee from Syria." This is not about Jesus' rejection of Nazareth, Britain, or anyone else. This is about the expansiveness and inclusiveness of God's favour. It means that nothing can separate us from the love and divine favour of God in Christ Jesus. Regardless of the barriers we've faced or the boundaries that have enclosed us the divine favour still breaks through. It also means we ought not to be setting barriers between the divine favour and anyone else. To the degree we try to deny another human favour or the divine favour of God, Jesus will pass through our midst and go on his way. That's what happened to the people of Nazareth. Jesus did not go on his way because he was rejected. He was rejected because he would not go their way.
- 8) So the questions for us are the same as the questions Jesus' friends and family were wrestling with in Nazareth that day. Who are the 21st Century "widows" and "lepers" among us? Who are the vagabonds, don't belongs, accusers, abusers the hurt and ignored? Is God's grace big enough for the Jew and the Muslim? For the Protestant and the Catholic? For the married and the divorced? For the soldier and the terrorist? For the bigot and the bully? Those from every station and orientation? This morning's Gospel reminds us that none of this is for you or me to decide. The grace of God is just that – it's God's grace. It's not for any one of us to dictate or deny. All we can do is celebrate and share it. The account of Jesus' near death experience that day in Nazareth, is the invitation to get out of God's way and to get with the program. It is a call to the Church – our church and the larger Church as a whole – to not be left standing on the cliff like the people of Nazareth, only to find that Jesus has passed through the midst of us – untouched. What we don't want to find is that he's continued on his way sharing grace, doing justice, and offering God's blessings to a world so desperate for it, and that we were too busy or too angry or too self-absorbed or too selfish and scared to join him in that work.