

Sermon for Epiphany 4C

The Text: Luke 4:21-30

Today Luke brings us back to the synagogue at Nazareth where we visited last week, to hear the amazing touring preacher, Jesus. Reports have circulated about him throughout the whole region and people who heard about the miracles he has performed in Capernaum have flocked to listen. The atmosphere is bubbling with anticipation and as you look forward intently, you can see Jesus step up to the lectern. A few people make shushing noises and the excited chatter of the crowd suddenly dissipates as the synagogue attendant hands Jesus the scroll of Isaiah the prophet. Jesus reads from chapter 61:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me

because He has anointed me to proclaim the Gospel to the poor,

He has sent me to preach deliverance to the captives and that the blind will receive their sight

to free those who are oppressed

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

Everyone leans forward on the edge of the stone benches they are sitting on and every pair of eyes is glued on Jesus. Without any fuss, he rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the synagogue ruler, and sits down. Then Jesus begins his sermon: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Wow!! What does Jesus' mean? It soon dawns on them that Jesus is proclaiming himself as the long-promised Messiah. He's come to bring freedom at last—the freedom Israel longed for from the hated Romans who have taken over. And so everyone speaks well of him. This is exactly what they wanted to hear! All are amazed at the words of grace coming out of his mouth.

Then someone asks: "Isn't this the son of Joseph?" And then it clicks for you—yes, you know this guy. He is Joseph's son! He's a *hometown* boy. Jesus continues:

"Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we have heard you did at Capernaum.' Truly I say to you that no prophet is accepted in his own town."

To illustrate this, Jesus points to Elijah and Elisha who were well known for their teaching and miracles. But at critical times they and the message from God they brought were not welcomed in Israel, so God sent them to help those outside of Israel instead. When there was a chronic drought

and a terrible famine affected the whole land, there were many widows in Israel, but God sent Elijah to bless a widow of Zarephath in Sidon, beyond Israel's borders. Even though she had nothing to give God, God miraculously provided food for her. And in the time of Elisha none of the lepers in Israel were cleansed, but only Naaman from Syria.

Uh oh! This isn't going to go down too well. Is Jesus daring to suggest that the gifts of God's grace are *not* tied to one's nationality? Does Jesus seriously think God would help and bless these Gentile *outsiders*...this unholy rabble!? God favours Sidon, not Israel?! Does God heal in Syria, not Nazareth?! How dare Jesus suggest that God should care about them—as if *they* are deserving of God's help and favour. It's impossible! The widow and Naaman are both Gentiles; pagans; heathens, they should get what they deserve! Whoever proof-read Jesus' sermon should have told him this would have upset the Nazareth crowd. Is Jesus saying that Nazareth doesn't have any special claim to blessing and God would turn from them to other nations?

That *is* the *very* thing that Jesus is saying. The episodes with Naaman the Syrian and the widow of Zarephath was the first glimpse that God was sending his saving help to all people...because he *cared about* them. His love and compassion for all people would be found in Christ, the one sitting there before them in the Synagogue at Nazareth, in whom is the fulfilment of Isaiah 61 for their deepest and most desperate needs: freedom from bondage to sin, death and Satan.

When the people thought Jesus meant that he would bring them political freedom they loved his 'gracious words'. When they realised that he was saying Nazareth had no special claims to God's blessing, and that they themselves needed forgiveness, they exploded with hostile rejection. In one of the biggest backflips ever, those who were so delighted with his words of grace are now fuming with outrage. In their eyes Jesus has gone from hometown hero to lowdown zero. He's not the kind of Messiah these people wanted, and certainly didn't tell them what they wanted to hear. So rising up they cast him out of the city and led him away to edge of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down.

This attempt at murdering Jesus foreshadows his later rejection in Holy Week. The shouts of 'Hosanna!' and welcome by people lining the streets who waved branches and threw their cloaks before Jesus as he rode triumphantly into Jerusalem, would wildly swing just days later to shouts of "Crucify him!" by those baying for his blood.

How unexpected that God should use the bitter darkness of human evil in which to shine his love so brightly. How unexpected that God should send Jesus into the world to love even those who rejected him and sought to

kill him. How unexpected that Jesus should come for those so undeserving of his love. But that is what Jesus did all throughout his ministry, welcoming sinners and tax collectors and eating with them, ministering to the broken and unclean, those deemed by society not good enough to be included, let alone to be considered righteous.

The people at Nazareth didn't realise that God's love and favour was not just for them. They couldn't comprehend that God could possibly care for and desire a relationship with the so-called no-hopers in this world; those who were outsiders; those who didn't present well; those who didn't measure up; those who were unclean; those who were offensive. But then again, God's love is radically different from human understandings of what love is and should be like.

Paul describes what love is in our second reading today from 1 Corinthians 13. But it is not in our human efforts but in Christ that we see what true love is. Jesus did not come to boast, but to serve. He wasn't proud or arrogant, but gentle and humble. He wasn't envious, but self-emptying. He wasn't self-seeking, but seeks the lost. Throughout Jesus' life and ministry, in his perfect obedience to his Father, but especially in his brutal death on the Cross, the love of God and his compassion for all people—which is not just a *feeling* but a *doing*—has been shown to the whole world. The characteristics of love that Paul describes are the very characteristics of God's enduring, long-suffering love that went to such astonishing lengths as Jesus, the son of Joseph and Son of God hung on the Cross, patient and suffering, for all people, patient and suffering for you. A love not counting our wrongs against us...but counting them against Christ.

God's love is not just for us. It's not just for those from a particular area. It's not just for those in a particular group. It's not just for those who meet our expectations or standards. God's love is not just for those we like. God's love is not dependent on what people look like, or what they are good at, or how well they perform, or whether they fit in. Nor does God withhold his love for those who we think are beyond love or who have gone past the point of no return. Jesus' confronting words to the synagogue crowd in Nazareth show us that none of us have a monopoly on God's blessing over and above others. The Cross shows us that. The Cross didn't come with a list of postcodes or behaviour codes or dress standards. In his ministry Jesus came to those who had nothing, he came to sinners and tax collectors, those who were unwell, broken and disabled.

And he still does today.

Everyone needs Christians to show them God's love. That's why the Devil loves nothing more than to tempt us to write other people off; to tempt us to think they are beyond the point of no return; to think of ourselves more deserving of God's love than others; to think of some people deserving of our kindness and others deserving of our rejection. That's so dangerous. For there is a part of ourselves in every person we are tempted to write off. And when we fall to the temptation to do that, we have condemned ourselves. For you and I are like the destitute widow of Zarephath. We have absolutely nothing to give to God to earn his blessing. Indeed we were once outside the nation of heaven; once enemies of God. You and I were like Naaman the Syrian, unclean with the leprosy of sin.

Yet just as God showed his favour to those people for no other reason other than that he loved them, so too he has shown his favour to each of you here today. He paid the price that you were unable to pay, by giving what you were unable to give: the holy and precious blood of his own Son, purifying you from all your sin. And through the waters of baptism, God sought you and brought his love for the world to you personally so that, even though you don't deserve it, all the saving benefits of Jesus' death and resurrection have been given to you. In gentleness and kindness, Jesus washed you and gave you his very own righteousness so that you have the right to be called a child of God, and can join with him in having access to his Heavenly Father's peace.

2000 years after Jesus preached in the place of worship at Nazareth, God continues to show his saving love to his baptised faithful, here in this place of worship today. For today, this Scripture Jesus first read at Nazareth is again fulfilled in your hearing. He is here again to read the Gospel for you. He is here to give the gospel to you, by not counting your wrongs against you but instead forgiving your sins. He proclaims his peace is with you, so that you and I and all those who have only ever known rejection can look forward to eternal acceptance as God's own dear children. Amen.