

Reflection – Pastor Seng Eng Low – 30 January 2022, Epiphany 4

Last week, the gospel reading was about Jesus' appearance in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. You may remember that Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah. Today's reading is a continuation of that story and it tells us how the people responded to what Jesus said. And it was very dramatic response.

At first the people were very impressed. We are told 'all spoke well of him' and they 'were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.' And they said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' In other words, they were claiming him for themselves, taking pride in the fact that Jesus was the son of one of their neighbours, Joseph. One of the local lads who had turned out so well.

But even as the people were busy congratulating themselves that one of their own had made good, Jesus continues to speak. And what he said next was not what the people wanted to hear. Not at all! They were filled with rage! In fact, they were so angry, so incensed at what Jesus said that they got up and chased him out of town. They took him to the edge of a cliff so that they might hurl him off. But somehow, Jesus managed to escape from them. That was nearly a lynching. The people of Nazareth, Jesus' own hometown were so enraged by what he said that they were going to murder him.

So, what did Jesus say that was so offensive to their ears? One minute the crowd was singing his praises, and the next, they were after his blood. What happened?

I need you to cast your mind back to last week's reading. Remember how Jesus stood up in the synagogue and he read from the scroll. He read the well-known words from the prophet Isaiah. Remember he read:

¹⁸ "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,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." And then, Jesus said: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

Now this was wonderful news for the Jewish people. Isaiah, their prophet had first prophesied those words more than 700 years ago and the people had been yearning, longing for the fulfilment of God's promises. For the coming of God's anointed one, for the year of the Lord's favour, for the year of Jubilee. So when Jesus told them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,' this was a dream come true, this was what they had been waiting for, God's anointed one coming to put the world to rights. They were thrilled!

Now, the people of Nazareth thought they knew Jesus. He was one of them, wasn't he? They had seen him grow up among them, learning his trade from Joseph. But what Jesus says next was not what they were expecting, and this completely changes their attitude towards him. This turns them against him. What did Jesus say to upset them so? To the extent that they wanted to kill him?

Jesus gives 2 examples, tells two stories from the Jewish scriptures that the people in the synagogue didn't want to be reminded about.

The first story was about the prophet Elijah. In the time of Elijah, there was a famine in the land for 3 years and six months. No rain. The people were starving. God spoke to Elijah and told him to go to the widow of Zarephath and that she would give him food. Elijah went to the widow and asked for some bread. The widow told Elijah that she would share with him the last of her flour and after that she and her son would just lay down and die because there was no more food to be had. But Elijah told the woman that the jar of flour she had would not run out until it rained and the famine ended. And that's what happened. Through the widow, God performed a miracle to sustain Elijah and the widow and her son till the famine ended.

What was there to offend Jesus' hearers in this story? The thing that offended them was that the widow of Zarephath *was a Gentile*. An outsider. Jesus says that at the time of the famine, there were many widows in Israel, but God directed Elijah to go to a gentile widow. Not one of them, not an Israelite, a gentile.

And the next story Jesus told was similarly offensive to the ears of the Jewish listeners. The prophet Elisha was sent by God to Naaman the Syrian and he cured Naaman of his leprosy. Who was Naaman? Naaman was a commander of the Syrian army. Not only was he a Gentile but an enemy of the Jewish people. Now, there were plenty of lepers in Israel at that time, but God chose to send Elisha to cure Naaman, not only a gentile, but Israel's enemy!

The significance of these two stories Jesus recounted was this: Jesus was telling the people that the good news he was bringing, the good news prophesied by Isaiah, was not only for his Jewish hearers but for *all* people. That God was not merely the God of the Jews but the God of all people. For hundreds of years, the Jewish people had thought that they were the chosen ones, that God, Jaweh, was their God. But Jesus tells them, no, God extends his love to all people. And this is what so enraged the people of Jesus' hometown that they were even ready to kill Jesus for saying that. What is it about human beings that they feel the need to be special, to be the chosen ones?

Let us turn to the passage from Corinthians. This well-known and well-loved passage is often read at weddings. And after hearing it repeatedly in the

context of wedding ceremonies, it is easy to regard it as merely a somewhat sentimental recipe for marital bliss. How lovely! How charming!

But when Paul wrote these words to the Corinthian church, he was writing to a community which was deeply troubled by rivalries and internal conflict, and in danger of falling apart. You see, within the Corinthian community, there had arisen a sense of competition about which of the spiritual gifts were the more 'superior'. There were some who claimed that the gifts of tongues was the most important, others that prophecy was more worthy. And those who had the more 'desirable' spiritual gifts, thought themselves better than others in their community. They, like the people of Jesus' hometown, liked to think of themselves as special in God's eyes. The chosen ones.

But all this rivalry was leading to jealousy and quarrels among them, and it is against this background, that Paul tells them that all their gifts, of tongues, or knowledge, or prophecy, of faith, all these gifts come to nothing if they have not love. He pleads with them to stop thinking that their spiritual gifts make them superior to others. Their gifts are nothing if they don't have love. Love is what will define them as God's people.

This desire to think of themselves as special or chosen is certainly not unusual. It can again be seen in the attitude of the British in the age of imperialism. When James Cook sailed into Botany Bay, called Gamay, by the local Dharawal people, he encountered the local inhabitants. The Dharawal warriors threw spears at them and made gestures to tell them to go away, but as we know, these gestures were futile and James Cook and his party landed anyway. They planted the British flag on the land and claimed the land for the British crown, saying that it was 'terra nullius' or nobody's land.

How was it that Cook and his party, having encountered the local indigenous people and having had spears flung at them by these same people, could claim that the land was 'terra nullius', nobody's land? I think part of the answer lies in the way that the British thought about themselves, and how they regarded the first nations people they encountered. The British clearly saw themselves as so much above the indigenous peoples they encountered, that they regarded these native peoples as not their equals. In fact, they saw the first nations people as less than human. And once you decide that they are not even really human, then it follows that the land can't possibly belong to them. It was 'terra nullius', nobody's land.

No doubt the British colonisers saw themselves as a kind of chosen people. No doubt they thought of themselves as having God on their side as they conquered the first nations people, massacred and enslaved them and tried to eradicate their culture.

And we know that unfortunately, the church was complicit in the oppression of the first peoples, making pronouncements and committing acts that we later

came to regret. The church probably did this in all sincerity. Like the people of Jesus' hometown, they thought that they knew him, they thought that they had him all figured out. They thought that Jesus belonged to them.

So, we need to be careful, whenever we catch ourselves claiming to know everything about Jesus. Because there is always more to Jesus than we think. Jesus can always surprise us. With a vision that is bigger, larger, more beautiful, more magnificent than we can ever imagine. If we think we can use Jesus to support our own plans, our own schemes, our own political agendas, our own petty prejudice- well, we can't. We can't domesticate Jesus to our own purposes.

The people of Nazareth wanted Jesus to play by their rules, fulfilling their expectations, saying things they wanted to hear. But as soon as Jesus stepped out of line. As soon as he said something that shook their world and challenged their pre-conceptions, they reacted against him violently. I wonder if this could happen again today? In our churches, among our people?

Today's gospel reading offers us a gracious invitation. To go beyond a superficial knowing of Jesus. To begin to know him as he is, not just as we want him to be. To really listen to what he is telling us. To deepen our faith, to deepen our understanding.

How can we do this? How can we seek to know him better? I think that one way is by opening ourselves to one another. Listening to and learning from, especially from people who may have different insights, even from those people we least expect to reveal the truth of God to us. For it is often they who are God's prophets. They may speak hard words we need to hear. They may show us a better way. This includes listening to those on the margins, including our first nations peoples. Welcoming them, including them in the conversation. And always out of love.

This morning we heard those wonderful words from the apostle Paul about faith, hope and love. It is love that opens us to one another. And to God. And to a new world where ancient hostilities are put to rest. Where the poor receive good news. Where captives are set free from things that keep us in prison. Where the blind can see new things. And where it is indeed the year of the Lord's favour. So that the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus may become present in our very midst.

Let us pray:

Jesus of Nazareth,

We give thanks that life with you is always full of surprises,

The surprise that we are offered grace when we don't deserve it,

The surprise that we are loved with all our flaws and failings,

The surprise that you can work through us to transform your world for good.

May we always be open to being surprised by you. Amen