

Nijmegen and Arnhem, February 3rd 2019

Readings Jer. 1:4-10, Psalm 71:1-6, 1 Cor. 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-30

'No prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town!' O dear... I couldn't help to notice a parallel with my own situation. I did not grow up here, but this is my home chaplaincy. Some of you have known me from the time I was a fledgling Anglican, just hatched and not having a clue. Some of you have been Anglicans all their lives. Who am I to stand here?

Let's do a little mind game. Imagine how you will come to me after the service. Dorienke, that was lovely. I enjoyed it so much. So wonderful, thank you. Where did you get all that from? Etcetera. And instead of thanking you, I will say: Stop flattering me. You will be sick and tired of me before long. You will remember some of the silly things I did or said when I was new here, and use them against me. Etcetera. I don't think you would try to push me in front of a trolley bus, but you certainly would be puzzled and even hurt. And I would imagine the atmosphere during coffee time being somewhat strained...

So what is happening here in this passage? Why is Jesus deliberately spoiling his own party? What is it that ticks him off? And what is it that makes the people of Nazareth so angry that they suddenly want to get rid of him?

The message that Jesus preached on this particular Sabbath was based on the reading for that day, which was from Isaiah 58 and 61:

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.'

It is a wonderful text for prophets, if they need inspiration for their ministry. It is a wonderful text for a joyful sermon. There is good news to be told! And that's what Jesus does. Gracious words come from his mouth. We may think it is a pity that only one line of his sermon has made it into Luke's account. But this one line is the main thing we all need to know.

'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

Jesus is applying this text directly to himself. He has been anointed, he has been sent by God to preach good news, to bring release, healing and freedom. It was a message the whole

Jewish people was hoping and praying for. Please God, let somebody come to our rescue! No wonder that all they all spoke well of him, as we read in vs. 22.

But still, at some point it turns nasty. And the turning point seems to be when they say: Is not this Joseph's son?

There is some local pride involved here, which is understandable. They all knew his star was rising throughout Galilee. He was preaching and healing people all over the place, and was praised by everyone. And if that happens to one of us – our family, our village, our church – we are proud to know him or her. There is nothing wrong with that in itself. But if the prophet then says certain things that we do not like, this pride can easily change into contempt. If the prophet challenges our beliefs, or criticizes our behaviour, we suddenly remember him as a little boy (or her as a little girl). And we resent and resist the message.

There is a song written by Keith Green (the one who wrote There is a Redeemer, number 500 in our hymn book) in which he expresses his grief that his parents do not want to hear about Jesus. The song concludes with the poignant words: Isn't this Jesus? Isn't this Joseph's and Mary's son? Well, didn't he grow up right here? He played with our children! What? He must be kidding! Thinks he's a prophet! Well, prophets don't grow up from little boys, do they?

Familiarity resents challenge. Jesus knows this quite well, and that is why he responds the way he does, using a well-known proverb: No prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. He warns them: If you want to claim me for yourself – If you just want to boast about me, because I come from this town – If you expect that I will give you a special treatment for the sake of auld lang syne – forget it. I am not here to fulfil your expectations of me. My work will exceed and challenge your wildest expectations. To appreciate this you will have to step out of your comfort zone, out of your limited, local way of thinking.

That is why Jesus continues with the stories of the widow in Sidon and Naaman the Syrian. He doesn't do that to offend them. He wants to broaden their perspective, because otherwise they will miss out on what is going on. Remember, he says, how Elijah was sent to this pagan widow? Remember how Naaman the Syrian turned to Elisha for help and was healed? Even the OT prophets worked outside the boundaries of Israel. Let us remember that even in OT times, God was not exclusively interested in Israel. Israel was supposed to be a blessing to all the nations. In creating a people for his own, God was already thinking about the whole world.

Now in Jesus' time many Jews did indeed believe that the gentiles had a special purpose: namely as fuel for the fires of hell. If that is your way of thinking, it is quite a step to accept that they could receive God's grace. And here is this young Jesus, whom they've all known from childhood, accusing them of narrow-mindedness! Criticizing their religion as if he knows more than they do! Denying them the security they thought they had as God's chosen people. How dare he? They are livid! They drive him out of the synagogue, and intend to throw him off the nearby cliff.

'But Jesus passed through the midst of them and went on his way.' He is not escaping within an inch of his life. He is in control. Somehow his authority makes the mob slink away and let him pass. 'Jesus went on his way'. It is a favourite expression of St. Luke. It means that Jesus moves on towards his goal, no matter what. The rejection of his people does not destroy him, nor his ministry. The poor will hear good news, the captives will be released, the blind will see, the oppressed will go free. God's kingdom will come.

There is an invitation and a challenge for us here, too. We could choose to prefer a Jesus whom we have known all our life; who is there for us, so we can have a cosy church life together.

But we cannot accept the good news **and** refuse to share it with others. We cannot accept our own release **and** leave others in their prisons. We cannot have our own sight restored **without** helping others to see. We cannot live in freedom **and** ignore those who are still oppressed. We cannot enjoy the Lord's favour, while **denying** it to those around us.

So - we are invited and challenged to step out of our comfort zone. Invited and challenged to allow Jesus to be different from how we saw him. Invited and challenged to follow him and to take part in his ministry of healing for the whole world – even if this means that some people would like to push us in front of a trolley bus. It is a risky life. But it is the life of the kingdom.

Are we willing to accept such an invitation? Are we open to that challenge? Are we willing to come and follow him, when he goes on his way?

I would like to conclude with a special prayer for justice, in line with the message we have just heard:

The gift of Jesus' life is justice for the world.

As members of the body of Christ, we are called to walk humbly and act justly.

Let justice roll down like waters.

Holy Spirit, unite us in our prayers

As members of the body of Christ, we are called to lavish God's grace and mercy on all.

Let us break through barriers of ethnicity, religion and culture.

Holy Spirit, unite us in our humanity

As members of the body of Christ, we are called to bring good news to the poor.

Let us condemn exploitation and the systems that perpetuate it.

Holy Spirit, unite us in anger towards injustice

As members of the body of Christ, we are called to treat all with dignity.

Let us recognize discrimination, oppression and abuse.

Holy Spirit, open our ears to the cries for justice

As members of the body of Christ, we are called to bring hope to others.

Let us be salt and light.

Holy Spirit, unite us in hope for justice