

## Sermon - the Nazareth challenge

Based on: Jeremiah 1.4–10; Psalm 71.1–6; Luke 4.21–30

### Continuing last Sunday's Gospel

- Last Sunday's Gospel reading described Jesus returning from his time of preparation in the wilderness, and starting to teach in the synagogues in the region of his hometown.
- Luke's first description of this teaching is when he arrives at Nazareth, where Jesus reads the passage from 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.'* (Luke 4.18-19)
- Jesus then claims that *he* is the one anointed by God's Spirit bringing good news, proclaiming release and recovery of sight, freeing the oppressed, and proclaiming God's acceptance through the outpouring of grace.
- Today's Gospel reading continues by repeating Jesus' dramatic affirmation that the word of God spoken through Isaiah has now come into effect, implicitly through Jesus.
- Scholars suggest that by making this account the very first description of Jesus' teaching, Luke is highlighting that the Isaiah passage that Jesus quotes is effectively the manifesto of what Jesus is setting out to do in his three years of ministry, and what he teaches his disciples to continue with after him.
- In effect it is - or should be - the manifesto of the church: that is, the continuing community of Christ's disciples.

### Expectations challenged

- The synagogue congregation at Nazareth are impressed:  
*All spoke well of him and were amazed at the [words of grace] that came from his mouth.* (Luke 4.23)
- But their response changes quickly, and after a short while they try to kill him.
- What went wrong, and why did Jesus remind them of some stories from Scripture apparently knowing they would be provocative?
- And what was Luke's intention by including this aggression as part of Jesus presenting his manifesto of ministry?
- The simple explanation is that Jesus challenges their expectations:
  - their expectation of what they assumed the Messiah's ministry manifesto to actually mean,
  - and their expectation of how the Messiah would accomplish it.
- Luke includes this aggressive reaction at the introduction of Jesus' ministry to help the Gospel reader understand that Jesus had fellow Jews opposing him for the whole duration of his ministry, not just at the end;
- and also to help subsequent generations of disciples know that if they are truly following in Jesus' way, they will likewise find themselves being similarly opposed.

## Sermon - the Nazareth challenge

### The continually-expected Messiah

- The first part of the Jews' expectation was that every generation since the time of Alexander the Great's conquest and subjugation of Palestine, and which the Roman empire continued, was expecting the Anointed One, the Messiah, to come in their own time.
- Indeed, quite a few people, both before and after Jesus' time, claimed to be the Messiah, and attempted to live up to the expectations the people had.
- And for each of these self-acclaimed Messiahs people were eager to believe and follow them.
- This helps to explain the initial positive response of the congregation, which could be understood as:
- 'Yes! This is Joseph's son - one of our own. At last Nazareth is going to be put on the map, because we will have produced the true Messiah!'
- This is a different angle from Mark's account of this story, and we should understand that Luke has a different purpose for this story, and changes not only the position of it in the sequence of events that make up Jesus' ministry, but also provides different details.
- This is a reason for being cautious about combining similar stories from different Gospel accounts together.

### 'The day of vengeance'

- The problem for the synagogue congregation comes with the second part of their expectation.
- And for that we need to return to the original text from Isaiah that Jesus had read from the scroll immediately beforehand, and which we focused on last Sunday.
- Here is the original text in Isaiah (61.1-2):  
*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the broken-hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour ...*
- Which is where Jesus stopped.
- But those familiar with the text, which would have been everyone waiting for their generation's Messiah, knew what the next line was:  
*... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,  
**and the day of vengeance of our God.***
- The day that God will avenge, through the actions of his Messiah, all those who oppress the Jewish nation, and all those who desecrate the people with their ritual uncleanness - that is, all Gentiles, and all Jews who collaborate with the Gentile enemy.
- The fact that Jesus did not read this statement, but stopped short, would probably have been initially overlooked by his hearers, and they would have heard it in their own heads.
- So the synagogue congregation thought they knew that Jesus would be like the other Messiahs that came before him - and we know to also include those who came after him - and take up weapons against the Roman occupiers, and purify the nation of Israel, and restore them to the golden age that was under King David, and his son Solomon.
- Jesus would have been familiar with this expectation: he might very well have had to work through this notion himself as a young adult, before coming to better comprehend how God's way was to be effected.
- So he pushes back on their expectations about what the Lord's favour actually looks like.

## Sermon - the Nazareth challenge

- He reminds them of no less than the prophet Elijah, and also Elijah's protégé Elisha - prophets that had a special significance for the Jews.
- The prophet Malachi himself states:  
*Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.*  
(Malachi 4.5)
- Elijah, because he never died but was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire, was expected to return, in body or in spirit, to prepare the way for the Messiah.
- This is why both John the Baptist and Jesus himself were at times considered to be Elijah, especially when they did not take up arms themselves, in the way that the Messiah was expected to.

### Elijah and Elisha

- So Jesus reminds the congregation of what Scripture had to relate about certain times during Elijah's and Elisha's ministries.
- He recounts the incident from 1 Kings 17.8-16 in which Elijah provides an unending supply of food for a Gentile widow and her son and yet makes no such provision for any Israelites.
- This directly opposes the expectation that God would have vengeance on the desecration of the Gentiles present in the land by way of their ritual uncleanness.
- This was not an account of the Lord God treating the Gentiles vengefully, but rather of extending his favour to the Gentiles as well - and through the revered Elijah, no less.
- No wonder the congregation was offended by Jesus pointing this out to them.
- But Jesus doesn't stop there.
- He 'stirs the pot' further by telling of the incident from 2 Kings 5.1-14 in which Elisha healed Naaman, the Syrian army officer, of leprosy, but did not heal any of the many Israelite lepers.
- Again, this directly opposes the expectation that the Lord God would have vengeance on the oppression of God's chosen people by the Gentile invaders.
- In Elisha's time this would have been the Assyrian empire, and in Jesus' time it was the Roman empire.
- Each successive occupying force - particularly the Babylonians, the Greeks, and the Romans - not only subjugated the Israelite or Jewish people in their own land, but defiled or destroyed their centre of worship, the temple in Jerusalem.
- And here was Jesus reminding God's people how the Lord was *not* taking vengeance through Elisha, but instead extending his favour to the oppressors as well, through Elijah's successor.

### "I will deliver you"

- At this point the congregation are so incensed at Jesus daring to point out how their Lord God was blessing the very people he was supposed to be destroying, that they give in to their rage, and take Jesus out to the nearby precipice to push him over it with the intention of making his neck break.
- Luke does not present Jesus' escape as a miracle, and it might be that by the time they arrived at the cliff their rage might have cooled to just being highly annoyed and irritated with Jesus.
- Nevertheless it is in these moments that he would have recalled passages of Scripture such as those from our Old Testament readings today:

*'you shall go to all to whom I send you,  
and you shall speak whatever I command you.  
Do not be afraid of them,  
for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.'* (Jeremiah 1.4-10)

## Sermon - the Nazareth challenge

- and

*Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked:  
from the grasp of the pitiless and unjust. (Psalm 71.4)*

### Comparing ourselves to Nazareth

- As I bring this sermon to a conclusion, I remind you that I suggested that Luke included the description of this aggressive response to Jesus' for us to learn from as well.
- I think that every church congregation, including us, can benefit from reflectively comparing themselves to that congregation in Nazareth.
- Do we object to our Lord God extending his blessing and favour to those outside our church - or perhaps object to members of the church working with God to extend his blessing to outsiders, to the undeserving, to those we might judge as immoral?
- For example, at one point the Church refused to baptise infants who were born out of wedlock, and while many churches thankfully no longer practise that prejudice, that same moral prejudice keeps reappearing in other forms - such as refusing to baptise children being raised by a same-sex couple.
- This is the same objection that the Nazareth congregation had to acknowledging how the Lord God blessed the Gentiles and the invaders through his own prophets.
- Like that congregation, do we object to a prophet coming amongst us and telling us God's truths that make us uncomfortable, that make us lose face, or that don't fit our expectations?
- Do we try to shut such prophets down? Or do we engage with that discomfort, and recognise that maybe God is challenging us to engage with a fresh perspective - maybe God's perspective?
- And finally, if our church is nice and comfortable, is it because we have driven out those who disturb us with God's word, the way that Jesus disturbed those in Nazareth?
- Because, one perspective of God's good news for *all* people, is that when it is taught truly, it disturbs the comfortable, and comforts the disturbed.
- May you receive whichever you need most.

Let us end with today's collect again:

Living God,

in Christ you make all things new:

transform the poverty of our nature

by the riches of your grace,

and in the renewal of our lives

make known your glory;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.