

Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> January

Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

Some books take a long time to get going, and it can be a struggle getting into them. I remember reading *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel a few years ago. Its quite a long tome about the life of Thomas Cromwell. And I have to admit that I started it three times.

The first couple of times I tried I couldn't get past the first hundred pages or so (which is only a short way into the book), but eventually on my third attempt I soldiered on and was soon riveted. The remainder of the book passed by in a flash, as did the equally long sequel 'Bring up the Bodies'. The story was gripping, the twists and turns extraordinary, the characterisation superb. For five or six years I have been eagerly awaiting the third volume of the trilogy which I hope will be published this year.

And we might be forgiven for thinking the same about Luke's gospel – that its taking a long time to get going.

After all, it's supposed to be an account of the life and ministry of Jesus. But so far in the first three chapters we have had a couple of strange births – complete with angels, shepherds and prophets, a child getting lost in Jerusalem and then just about a whole chapter about John the Baptist ending with a list of names tracing Jesus' ancestry back to Adam. When will this story get going? When will Luke start telling us about the amazing acts and teaching of Jesus?

Well, Jesus makes a short appearance in chapter 3 as he's baptised, but its here in today's gospel reading– midway through chapter 4 - that things begin in earnest and the story becomes a real page turner.

On the Sabbath he is in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth. This is his usual practice. As it was the custom for most people. He is handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Again, we can assume he regularly read the scriptures and commented on them in the synagogue. He reads the words from the scroll - perhaps it was the set passage for the day as in our lectionaries, but maybe it was one he chose (after all, we read that he unrolled the scroll and found the place where it is written..). Anyway, nothing unusual so far. All is normal.

And then he sits down and begins the sermon. The interpretation and exposition of the scriptures.

Remember what the scripture was.

*'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.'*

And his sermon begins – “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”.

That's where the set gospel for today finishes. So I guess I am expected to preach on Jesus' fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecy.

But actually I would like to take the gospel reading a little bit further, to the end of verse 30 as it gives the story more context and shows just how Jesus both fulfils and doesn't fulfil expectation. And it also shows how people respond to his word, and how that response can change once the word is unpacked and explained.

So – read vs 22-30.

*All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'<sup>23</sup> He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum."' <sup>24</sup> And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. <sup>25</sup> But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; <sup>26</sup> yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. <sup>27</sup> There were also many lepers<sup>[a]</sup> in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.' <sup>28</sup> When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. <sup>29</sup> They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. <sup>30</sup> But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.*

We might be forgiven for thinking at the end of the set reading that all has gone well. Jesus has used this moment in this synagogue in his home town to announce the beginning of his ministry and mission; to set out the agenda; to show that he has been chosen for this very purpose.

And certainly verse 23 seems to back this up “all spoke well of him and were amazed”

But then things change. And it's interesting to note that things change not because of something the people did, but because of something Jesus said. Let's paraphrase what's happening.

Jesus senses the positive response from the people, and it concerns him. Concerns him because he realises they haven't understood what he's about; what his true message is; what his purpose is; what his whole life and teaching and death and then resurrection will be about. They think he will be the long promised Messiah who will liberate the people from

the Roman occupation; who will initiate a period of greatness and power for Israel. They think this can only benefit them – the people of Nazareth – because he comes from there and is one of them. Nazareth is on the rise. Jesus will make us great again.

So Jesus says – look – you have heard about what has happened in Capernaum (a town by the Lake – 20 to 25 miles away). (So it would appear that Jesus had already begun active ministry, but not in his home town).

You have heard what has happened there and you will want it to happen here. Why? Because I come from here; because you want to see miracles here; because you want to see people healed – people from Nazareth healed; because you feel left out; because you want to feel important.

But Jesus goes on to say that prophets are not welcome in their home towns – almost saying that he wouldn't be able to perform such miracles in Nazareth because the people there are not in tune with his mission. What they are looking for is very different from what his mission is.

He gives a couple of illustrations from the Old Testament. Elijah – who fed the widow of Zarephath – a foreigner; Elisha who healed Naaman the Syrian – a foreign soldier.

Now at this the people begin to see the truth. Jesus is not about restoring the fortunes of Israel, still less about Nazareth. In his words about Elijah and Elisha he is hinting at a message which goes beyond the Jewish nation to include Gentiles, to include all.

They begin to see that Jesus is much more about inclusivity and all embracing love, and very little about restoring the nation. He simply is not the Messiah they were expecting or wanting. He would bring no good whatsoever to Nazareth. The good news he said he was proclaiming was not good news for them.

So they turned on him and led him to the cliff edge to throw him over. A scene that brings back to mind one of those temptations in the wilderness from earlier in the chapter where the devil urges Jesus to throw himself off the temple pinnacle because God would uphold him and protect him. Jesus did not give into that temptation, yet we see that God does protect him here when being faithful to his mission and to his God take him to a similar place.

So what can we say from all this. Is there a message for us?

Its all too easy to take the bits of Jesus's teaching that we agree with, and quietly ignore or forget those we don't.

This can be seen in the number of people who accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but don't accept his demands on their lives.

Its also tempting for us to fall into the trap that the people from Nazareth fell into. To limit the gospel and to think about ourselves and those who are like us, whilst being blind to the needs and concerns of others.

One of the great parables of Jesus is the parable of the sheep and the goats. In this parable Jesus talks about his followers caring for all those on the margins of society, and says that when we care for them – or conversely ignore them – we are caring for him or ignoring him. The parable finishes with the line

*Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are my brothers,<sup>[a]</sup> you did it to me*

I have heard Christians who have said that when Jesus says ‘brothers’ he means just Christians, and have gone on to say that consequently we only have an obligation to treat Christians well. This seems to me to deny that the obvious reading is about the way we treat ANYONE – as all people are part of God’s creation; all are made in his image and all are our brothers and sisters.

But its worth a thought.

Are we as churches more concerned about the care of our members, and people like us rather than about what’s going on out there? Perhaps we think of church as a place where people we like and have similar views and interests gather together. And I wonder if we do think like that at all, have we fallen into the trap of domesticating our faith rather than allowing it to open up new horizons.

I don’t think Jesus gave up on the people of Nazareth, despite them having such a parochial view of things. I believe he continued to love them and pray for them and will them into the Kingdom.

And I think he longs today for Christians to follow him in living out and proclaiming the world changing and barrier breaking message of the gospel to all people; not just those who have similar interests or come from similar backgrounds.

And I pray that we all might do so. In all that we do, all that we say and all that we are.