

**Leeds South and West Methodists
Personal Service for Sunday 30 January 2022
Jesus at the Synagogue in Nazareth (Part 2)**



Opening Prayer and an Antiphon for the fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Lord, help us to hear your word, and to speak it.
Help us to know your truth, and to show it.
Help us to feel your love, and to share it.
In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

O Holy One, who strips authority from all our gods,
From all whose falsehoods cloud our minds
With malice, greed, self-righteousness and pride:
Come, blaze with kindly grace; burn off the mists, and help us see.

Hymn StF 155 (HP 469), by Charles Wesley (1707-88), asking the Holy Spirit to help us hear God's word and understand it: Come Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire

Old Testament: *Jeremiah 1:4-10: God issues his call to a young man.*

Gospel: *Luke 4:21-30: Jesus, in the Nazareth synagogue, has just read from Isaiah.*

Prayers *

Lord, it is unsettling to imagine you coming among us;
for surely we are your people, like those of Nazareth?
And yet they rejected you, for they could not control you
and take what they wanted from you.
Forgive us when we behave likewise; when we think we can label and define you.
We are your own, and yet our welcome to others is limited.
We ask for our eyes and ears to be opened, that we may share
the limitless possibilities of your ministry. **Amen**

Lord God, you are patient and kind with us; you forgive and heal us
Thank you, Father, for your forgiveness
that covers all our feeble-mindedness, and sets us free to serve you. **Amen**

The Lord's Prayer

Reflection

This reflection follows on from last week's, because the gospel reading does the same. Luke tells us how the warm welcome Jesus receives when he goes to his home town changes to hostility when the people realise he's come to challenge

them. As our reading opens, Jesus is preaching among his relatives and friends, the people who watched him grow up. They have certainly heard the news of him starting some form of ministry down by Lake Galilee.

Have you ever wondered, as those people he'd grown up with must have done, why didn't he start out in Nazareth, his home? After all, it was safe there, in its valley in the hills, away from the distractions from holy living which you get when you meet travellers along main roads, and have daily contact with strangers?

Because he hadn't: Jesus had kicked off his ministry down by the Lake, where Greeks and other foreigners had been moving in among the Jews, and news about him would be spread by travellers from the outside world. Still, his people seem ready to welcome the prodigal back home. And the day does start well. The people are pleasantly surprised at how well he speaks. Only it doesn't last, because Jesus won't quit while he's ahead.

Jesus just has to go and trample on their toes, doesn't he? Let's face it, he's got to know what his own people are like. Hill-farmers, living away from the trade routes, proud of their lineage as Jews, settled for generation upon generation on the land that the One God gave their ancestors. If they're like thousands of similar settled communities across the ages, they look down on those towns by the Lake where you would find foreigners and foreign ways. Certainly they'd know that they're much better people than the coast-dwellers of Sidon, or the merchants of Damascus: both were traditional enemies of God's people. It says so in God's Holy Book, after all. If Jesus had only left it at proclaiming that the Advent of the Messiah, as foretold in Isaiah, was just about to happen, everyone would have been happy.

But Jesus has a message specifically for these established, holy, communities. It is that you don't get to pick and choose your favourite bits out of all the things recorded in your Holy Books. God doesn't only want to remind them of the things they'll find easy to hear. Jesus is saying that they can't conveniently forget the bits that grate on them, particularly if ignoring them will get in the way of welcoming God's children into God's community. That the widow of Zarephath received a blessing from God, when there were people as deserving in Israel: that an enemy general was healed of his leprosy in the Jordan. That God had promised a Messiah who would offer deliverance to all, not to some. That he welcomes folk who may not have been as faithful and deserving as Galilean hill-farmers, but who are still children of the Living God, capable of responding to his generosity.

If that interpretation of why the people turned on Jesus is near the mark, and all the evidence points that way, then it reminds me of some things.

It reminds me of the new minister at a church we visited, who'd put up a big sign saying, "Christ welcomes you here, whether you're male or female, black or white, gay or straight, rich or poor ..." Half the congregation left overnight. As one said to Joan and me, "We know that's what the Bible says, but why do we have to have it out there in public for everyone to see?"

It reminds me that we rarely get to talk things over as equals, nowadays, with people who disagree with us: that our life together has gone beyond the old arguments between readers of the Daily Mirror and the Sun. Increasingly, with the way social media works, you only come across views that are exactly like yours; and the media companies then push more extreme views at you than your own. So we can live in our little bubbles, and never realise that actually we're becoming intolerant of "those wrong-headed people over there". By the way, if you're speaking Gospel-talk, that phrase is pronounced "God's children".

It reminds me, too, that sometimes I need to hear messages I don't want to listen to: the victims of abuse talking about how well-meaning people have let evil flourish; the black and brown people highlighting the discrimination they still face; the disabled people, like my own stepdaughter, who still live with constant unnecessary difficulties in a world built around "normal people"; the workers, women and children who are trafficked and exploited; the LGBTQI+ who still encounter prejudice; the refugees from distant wars who were only forced out of their homes by the use of weapons, some of which were made in the UK.

I doubt anyone has answers to a single one of those problems. It isn't necessarily our job as followers of Jesus to solve every injustice, though we are certainly called to transform the world where we can. What is clear from the call of Jeremiah, however, is that once I begin to hear, I must respond with words and with actions. Neither youth, nor age, nor anything else is an excuse.

The step we must take every day is the one that Jeremiah took, that the folk in that synagogue couldn't take. It is to listen to what the Word of God is saying to us through our faith, and through what our eyes and ears tell us about the world. To listen, to be ready to respond and then? What can I actually do against the troubles of this world? I suggest a start – just a start – is found in the way one Jewish friend ends every chat or encounter, by calling us to seek God's peace:

"Shalom; Salaam; good day: walk carefully, and, above all, be kind."

Hymn StF 666 (HP 535) by Frances Ridley Havergal (1836-1879):

Master, speak! Thy servant heareth

Prayers*

Let us pray for the world and the Church, thankful of God's goodness.

We pray for the poor and for prisoners,
for the unemployed and for the homeless,
for those who will go without food today,
and for those who have the power to feed them.

Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for those who live in places of conflict,
for refugees and those fleeing war,
for those who experience conflict at home or at work,
and for those with the power to negotiate peace.

Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for those who have been oppressed,
for victims of crime, both disclosed and secret,
for children, women and men who feel unsafe,
and for those who administer justice.

Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for those we know who are in need,
for those who are ill or housebound, isolating or in fear,
for the very young and very old,
and for all those who care for them.

Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for ourselves,
for faith and hope and love to flood our lives,
and for the grace to pass those gifts of God to others.

Lord, hear our prayer. Amen

Hymn StF 661 (HP 767) by Charles Wesley (1707-88)

Give me the faith that can remove and sink the mountain to a plain

Closing Antiphon for The Presentation in the Temple (Candlemas) on 2 February

O Death-destroyer, freeing all death's slaves,
Tested by suffering, one of us and priest of mercy:
Come soon; lift up the gates, and grant your servants room
To lodge within the City of the Lamb.

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