

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

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Introduction

Jesus preaches his sermon and then elaborates on his meaning in response to their reactions. The positive comment suddenly turns violent as the words of Jesus reveal the hidden sectarianism of their hearts and so the people move to eject the scapegoat.

Text

Luke 4:21–30

He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked. Jesus said to them, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ And you will tell me, ‘Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’”

“Truly I tell you,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.”

All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

Comment

This is a troubling passage for someone like me, a person of Christian faith, who has worked in peace building and reconciliation for several decades. It’s troubling for me because my model of faith, Jesus, steps into an otherwise peaceful situation and picks a fight.

Everyone is speaking well of him it says in v22, everyone is pleased that one of their own is making a mark on the world....until he stirs the waters. Surely he must have felt the atmosphere begin to turn? But far from taking a step back and adopting a more conciliatory tone, he ramps it up.

Our lectionary text begins in an awkward place with the words of Jesus sermon based upon the text from the Isaiah scroll (Luke 4:18–19). It's a one sentence sermon which offers incredible hope to people who were poor, captive, blind and oppressed. No wonder this was received well.

It may even have been that the comment about 'Joseph's son' actually revealed an impression that surely whatever great things this new preacher was bringing they would be distributed first amongst his own people, in the town where he was raised. They wouldn't be the first community seeking to benefit from the fame or notoriety of a local daughter or son.

It might also explain their eagerness for him to perform some of the wonders he had done in other places.

The thing is, as Jesus unpacks the content of his vocation for them, and elaborates on his brief sermon, the implications weren't too popular. Jesus wasn't about to let local populism, or unspoken but quietly understood sectarianism, blow him off track. And so the biblical examples he draws to their attention concern God's care for foreigners instead of locals.

People are offended then by the outworking of the sermon and its connection to the mission of this new preacher and miracle-worker. Elijah was sent to end the hunger of the foreign widow and to heal the disease of the foreign soldier (who was a general who led the enemy army). The implications are therefore clear, the goodness of God is extended to the foreign one who is hungry and the stranger who is ill.

It raised the possibility that the Spirit of the Lord in Isaiah had anointed this Jesus with a message of good news for the poor, the hungry, the captive and the blind but that the poor, the hungry, the captive and the blind were foreign too.

Which might have been OK if he had been willing to offer a preferential position to his old neighbours in Nazareth. But that's not the way of Jesus and so they are scandalised enough to eject him from their company, like the scapegoat in Lev 16.

You see, being brought up in Nazareth, he would have been expected to know who was 'in' and who was 'out'. Who you are 'for' and who you are 'against'. Who is 'inside' the circle and definitely who must remain forever 'outside'. At first it looks to everyone like he has affirmed the cherished values of the town, and he is the famous extension of us.

But Jesus won't massage egos. Jesus is a threat to the easy peace of the community, comfortable in its sectarianism, so long as no-one talks about it. So he talks about it, and in talking reveals the hearts of those present.

And their hearts are towards violence and they know that peace will only be

returned through the violent ejection of the disturber of peace, so that the 'innocence' of the citizens of Nazareth can once again go unchallenged. So they try to kill him because what use is the love of God towards us if our God doesn't also hate our enemies.

Jesus escapes...just. But the sudden escalation in the anger of the crowd faced with the truth of its own intolerance is a warning that Jesus might not be so fortunate the next time. And there will be a next time, when the enthusiastic embrace of the crowd on Palm Sunday will turn murderous by Friday.

So back to what was originally troubling about this passage. Is Jesus initiating violence, or is he merely naming the violence that is already there, albeit artfully concealed?

Response

It is foundational to Christian faith that we come to the realisation that though we profess to be friends, we are actually enemies of God – not the other way around. And that as enemies we are capable of violence against God – not the other way around.

In fact we are scandalised by the loving capacity of God to embrace even enemies... even us. But the Gospel says that I know God loves enemies because God loved me.

This in turn challenges me about those who I might consider my enemies.

Some forms of Christian faith require enemies, outsiders and scapegoats. Those who are not pure enough, don't love the right way, fail to use the right names for God.

Some leaders too require of their people that they agree on the enemy: immigrants, Muslims, the Irish, the British. In our culture, or community, or nation who would we prefer was pushed off a cliff?

In what ways have I practiced a faith or a belonging that required enemies? How might God scandalise me? Make me angry? What is required of me when confronted with the violence that is already there?

Prayer

Loving God,
It's Good News that you are loving
So why is it so hard to rejoice
When my enemy is gathered
Into your loving embrace?

Is it because I need my enemy
To know who I am?
To know where I stand?
And where You stand?

I'm unsure what to do
With a God so extravagant
with inclusion.
Because I'm not.
Or not always.

Help me to see
The violence in me
That sits only just
Below the skin of me.

And bring me food
In this famine of love
And healing in this
Disease of heart
So I might love my enemy
With the fierce love
You have for me.

Amen