

Luke 4:21-30
Not the most popular person

Sometimes, when a preacher is preparing the sermon, s/he finds herself hoping for a particular response. Sometimes it doesn't happen. Sometimes when parishioners gather together, they come hoping for a certain kind of message. Sometimes that doesn't happen either.

Nowhere is the possibility that this can and does occur more evident than in this morning's Gospel lesson.

The townspeople, the parishioners, Luke reports, converge upon Jesus, the preacher. By the sheer weight of their numbers and their overwhelming anger at what he says, they "carry" him along to the outer limits of the town, to a cliff. The level of frustration and indignation has grown to the point where they are prepared to hurl him off the cliff - this local lad, this young man whom they have watched grow up, this, their neighbour.

Clearly, no one dozed off in *his* sermon. Clearly, whatever he said, Jesus told them something they didn't want to hear.

And yet, at first, people are amazed, intrigued, delighted with Jesus. He reads to them from Isaiah, a portion that embodies the promises of God. Liberty, sight, hearing, justice, healing of everything that is broken - these are promised. And more than that, Jesus - one of their own, all grown up now - owns the task of making the promises of God, reality.

Or so it seems.

Had Jesus stopped there, he might have been hailed as a hero, carried out on the shoulders of the hometown crowd like the MVP of next week's Superbowl.

But Jesus doesn't seem to know when to stop. Despite knowing what would please his former neighbours, family and friends, Jesus confronts them.

Actually, Jesus tells them a couple of stories. Usually it's the stories that make the sermon more "enjoyable," less dry, less tedious isn't it?

So, what goes wrong with Jesus' stories? In a nutshell, Jesus doesn't give the people what they want most. And, it isn't because he doesn't understand their needs, their wants, their longings. He knows, more than anyone, how they have hoped for a messiah to fulfill their expectation of God's promise to the Jews. He knows that they want to hear of God's special place for Israel, of God's particular caring for the children of Israel.

In just a few sentences, Jesus disappoints them utterly. Had he been preaching for a "call", not only would he not have secured the job, he would have been run out of town on a rail. Indeed, the reaction of the townsfolk is much more spectacular and violent!

You see, after Jesus has recounted the promises of God, he tells his listeners that the promises are not only for them. He tells them that their exclusive claim to God and God's blessings is erroneous.

The folk in the pews in the synagogue of Nazareth, that temple which symbolized all the hopes and dreams of Israel in that day, were looking to Jesus to be the Messiah, but he spends most of his time with outcasts. They want him to dazzle and reassure them with better wonders than he had done in Capernaum, but he performs no miracles at all in Nazareth. They want to hear of their unique, unquestionable right to God and God's promises, and he tells them



stories, from their own history that utterly refute the notion that God is in any way obligated to show them any favouritism or preference at all.

Jesus tells the people in Nazareth, and he tells us, that it is God's intention, for creation and every creature God has made, that all should be saved. He tells them and us that the people we think are beneath our concern, the people we deem as unworthy, the outsiders, the derelicts, the unclean, the "different from us", – all of them, in God's design, are to enjoy the same benefits, the same salvation that we hope for, that we pray for, for ourselves.

To drive the point home, Jesus reminds his listeners of the time when there was a famine in the land, when Elijah, one of our prophets, went, not to one of "our" starving widows, but to an outsider. He talks about Elisha, another of "our" prophets, who was sent to cure a leper, not one of "our" lepers, but a "Syrian" leper, an outsider.

So ... outsiders are in! That is one of the messages that the people of Jesus' day hear, loud and clear – a message they do not like one iota.

I wonder if we are any more open to that teaching than they were? Perhaps our reaction is a little more subdued, a bit more restrained, but doesn't it still rankle us – to think about some of the people with whom we may well be sharing the kingdom?

And, as if this isn't enough, Jesus talks about our adopting, our owning God's mission, God's intention for God's creation as our own deepest longing, our own purpose in life. Remember? When Jesus said that the prophecy was fulfilled in him that day in Nazareth, that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, he meant that, today, setting the captives free, binding up the broken, bringing dignity, justice and equity to the oppressed is to be our mission – the mission of each and every one of us. It is what God meant when he first made the covenant with Abraham, "I will bless you, so that you may be a blessing."

God calls us to live and teach and even preach in such a way that we will help call the world to a new way of seeing things, to a new way of living. And he promises us, what he promised the prophets and all our faith ancestors – that he will give us the words to say; that he will give us everything we need to do the task to which he calls us; that he will provide the support and companionship, the helpers we need; that he will pour out his Spirit upon us and the call he issues to us; that he will never abandon us, whatever we are doing.

We are blessed – not so that we will enjoy special favour, exclusive rights to the kingdom. Rather, we are blessed, so that we will be a blessing to everyone to whom God leads us.