

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Luke 4:21-30

Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." 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?"

He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his own hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 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. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

REFLECTION 1:

A SET BACK AT NAZARETH

I remember the Patrician Year of 1961. It was a year when St. Patrick's mission to establish the faith in Ireland was commemorated in ceremonies, song and lectures. One of these was Archbishop Fulton Sheen's well-publicised address to priests and religious in the Theatre Royal, Dublin. To hear this famous preacher speak on God's call filled the 4,000-seat theatre to the rafters. All that I can now recall was Fulton Sheen's reference to the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem. He remarked that of all the furnishings that adorned that hallowed spot, no mention was made of a chair. This, remarked the Archbishop, was to bring home the message in our day that the priests in the Temple were to be sentinel and alert in proclaiming the word of God to the people. After two hip-replacements I am not sure how I might have abided by his counsel!

Reading today's Gospel, I was reminded how Jesus' initial cordial reception at Nazareth turned to violence as he was driven from the synagogue, barely escaping a violent assault. What angered the people was the apparent compliment that Jesus paid to Gentiles. The Jews were so sure that they were God's people that they tended to look down on all others. Some believed that 'God had created the Gentiles to be fuel for the fires of hell'. And here was this Jesus whom they all knew, preaching as if God especially favoured the Gentiles. It was beginning to dawn on them that there were things in this new message the like of which they had never dreamed. Jesus indicated in his homily that he intended to fulfil the messianic prophecies (Luke 4: 18-19/Isa. 61: 1-3) and proclaimed they were 'fulfilled in your hearing'. The saving era of the Messiah had begun. Jesus did not go elsewhere because he was rejected at Nazareth: rather he established himself and his message to all because it was God's will for him to do so.

Through his Gospel and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, Luke portrayed Jesus and the church reaching out with the goodness of salvation first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. God's concerns as revealed in Jesus are universal and inclusive.

Despite the rejection he experienced, Jesus remained resolute. His courage and determination to continue his work are clear in the fact that even though an angry crowd wanted him dead, he passed through their midst and continued on his way. Jesus' action reminds us of Isaiah's prophecy regarding

the mission of the word of God – ‘So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but shall do what pleases me, achieving the end for which I sent it (Isa. 55:11).

It is interesting to note that Luke tells us that it was Jesus' habit to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath. There must have been many things with which he radically disagreed and which grated on him – yet he went. The worship in the synagogue might be far from perfect, yet Jesus never omitted to join himself to God's worshipping people on God's day.

Jesus is the incarnate word God of spoken into this world. In all he said and did, Jesus carried out the will of the God who sent him. Today Jesus' followers are sent and spoken by God into the world, to heal, to preach, to teach and establish God's justice, peace and truth.

REFLECTION 2: REJECTION

Jesus' rejection by the people of his hometown, is as it were, a 'curtain-raiser' of what will take place in the days ahead. People will reject Jesus - even violently. And today people still reject Jesus and the good news of Salvation that he brings. When asked why he didn't follow Jesus, a boy in his late teens said bluntly, 'Because if I did, many of my friends would reject me and I couldn't take that kind of rejection right now'. Obviously peer pressure was influencing him. Maybe he will meet a good girl that might influence him to abandon the peer pressure and start following the Lord.

On June 27th 1980, only 2 months before he was murdered, Archbishop Oscar Romero referred to the Gospel we have just heard, and this is what he said; "In the most sublime homily ever given, Jesus closes the book and says, 'These things have been fulfilled today'. That is what a homily is saying. God's word is not about times past, but a living and spirited word that is being fulfilled here today. So is our effort to apply God's eternal message to people's concrete circumstances'. Romero did this and died for it because he was doing what we hear Jesus doing in his home town synagogue at Nazareth - helping people to understand the 'today' implications of the biblical word. Last Sunday, the Gospel proclaims how Jesus the prophet was approved by the people - but not for long!

Today we hear how the implications of what he said begins to dawn on them and now their narrow-mindedness begins to assert itself. Here is someone they have known or think they have known from childhood, the boy who has Joseph has his father. The people of Nazareth would like to own Jesus and make him conform to their expectations, perhaps he would be good for business by attracting the crowds to Nazareth to witness some of the miracle-workings he has done in Capernaum. But Jesus is the free prophet bound by nothing but compassion for the poor he has just announced. What angered the people was the apparent compliment Jesus paid to the Gentiles. The Jews were so sure that they were God's people that they tended to look down on all others. Some even believed that 'God had created the Gentiles to be fuel for the flames of hell!' and here was this young Jew, whom they all knew, preaching as if the Gentiles were specially favoured by God. It was beginning to dawn on them that they were things in this new message the like of which they never dreamed. But when they heard it they were enraged, so they hustled Jesus out of the town and took him to the brow of a nearby hill intending to throw him down. But Jesus slipped through the crowd and walked away. What Jesus was walking towards was another hill, towards another angry crowd, and be thrown down, this time on a cross and lifted high. If today's Christian communities are closed or divided, Jesus will pass again through our midst and walk away.