

Third Sunday after the Epiphany – 21 January 2007.

*Nehemiah 8.1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; I Corinthians 12.12-31; Luke 4.14-21*

*Rev'd Rob Lamerton*

*Last week Jesus was at a wedding which was beginning to look rather gloomy because they had no more wine! In that story he was the bringer of great joy to the party!*

*Today our in story, Jesus is at the synagogue but instead of joy he stirs up a great anger! The anger appears to be in response to his suggestion that he is the one who fulfills Isaiah's words about the true Servant of God, when they know Jesus is Joseph's son — a local!*

The anger grows as Jesus reminds the people that God has gone out beyond the people of Israel, because they failed to respond! Perhaps it is this challenge — that they are now failing once again to respond — that confirms their opposition to Jesus.

The story reminds us that we Christians — like the Jewish men of the synagogue — do not like to have a comfortable religion challenged. We like things done decently and in order!

So last week Jesus was the source of great joy, but this week Jesus is the source of great confrontation and anger. Just as Jesus confronted the men in the synagogue in Nazareth — so too this challenges us today to think seriously about God's call:

to bring good news to the poor,  
release to the captives,  
sight to the blind,  
freedom for the oppressed; and to  
proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

Every now and then we need a wake-up call — a reminder of things we've forgotten or a warning not to get too comfortable.

At first "all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came out of his mouth". But when they realized who he is and Jesus pointed out that God's prophets found a ready welcome among Gentiles, they were filled with rage. (Sadly some people like to think they are the focus of God's attention!) They don't just want him out of the synagogue, they want him dead!

I would hope that here at St Philip's challenging and opposing views would be met with spirited discussion and charitable argument, not violence! And yet our world seems to be a more and more violent place when it comes to political and religious difference. Sadly the violent and negative seem to be more acceptable for our news programs. But there are also dialogue groups, interfaith study groups, etc. Why don't we look out for such a group and join it or start one ourselves?

The story from Nehemiah, the prophet and governor of the people returning from exile, gives us an ancient picture of the pattern of synagogue worship. It also offers a parallel to the story of Jesus and the synagogue.

(Synagogue means gathering together.)

Ezra the priest and scribe read the Torah, the law. Jesus read Isaiah which is at the heart of the law. While Ezra read the people were standing. We stand to read the gospel and honour the story of Jesus. Ezra “gave the sense”, interpreting the meaning. We have a sermon to explain the reading. The response of the people was to worship. In the synagogue of Nazareth and in our gathering today our response is to worship.

In his reading, Jesus identified himself with the Servant of God. Remembering that this is the first story in Luke’s gospel after Jesus was baptized, we begin to be introduced to Jesus who:  
is empowered by the spirit;  
fulfills the expected role of God’s servant;  
proclaims the ministry of liberation; and  
confronts the religious expectations of his people.

We see the Spirit at work in the ministry of Jesus. The same Spirit empowers the early Christians and is at work today amongst God’s people, challenging, inspiring, confronting, encouraging, empowering, unifying — pulling us together into one body, but each with our own special function to play.

The concept of the Body of Christ appears only the writings of Paul and is thought that it may have originated with the Corinthians. There may have been a the belief among the Corinthians that you had “made it” spiritually when you belonged to the body, but Paul is eager to point out the responsibility of the individual within the body and the variations in individual ministries.

The readings recall for us our responsibility to recognise the body of Christ, that we each have a part to play. I’m so very aware that some people doubt that they make a contribution! Some people make a contribution by just being here and by quiet prayer and some by simple friendship — as well as others who do more obvious things. Our Parish Council has begun to work by discerning areas of gifts and interests, and it has worked well.

But all this is not for some purpose of being a church institution. It is to enable us to be the Body of Christ and as such to share the tasks Jesus assumes in the gospel story:  
to bring good news to the poor  
to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind;  
to let the oppressed go free; and  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.

*In England I encountered a hospital that has cared for homeless men for hundreds of years. Such ministries can be long lasting.*

*Yet when I took part in a bread distributed in Ministry at St Paul's for a number of years. I realized how tiring it was. We need to discern how to be of service without people burning out.*

*Yet I wonder if we couldn't do something for example through connecting with our African friends, by working with refugees and contributing to care for homeless men.*

*Let us together find way to move on in ministries of care, under the direction of God’s Spirit.*