

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany 28th January 2007

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Readings:

- Jeremiah 1:4-10
- Psalm 71:1-6
- 1Corinthians 13:1-13
- Luke 4:21-30

Text of readings is available at <http://divinity.library.vanderbilt.edu/lectionary/CEpiphany/cEpiphany4.htm>

Today's gospel is a continuation of last week's, where we heard about Jesus in the synagogue. He had used a quotation from the prophet Isaiah, which we later discover summarises his whole ministry

It's important to note that this story is about the first public preaching of Jesus. Mark and Matthew report this incident, but much later in their Gospels. Here in Luke, this is Jesus' first public appearance. By including it in the very first episode of Jesus' public ministry, Luke is clearly indicating the fickle nature of the crowd that will hound Jesus' ministry and the rejection that will culminate in his death.

Jesus' own words prove prophetic. He says "no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown," and his words came true when his own townsfolk, "drove him out of the town."

This episode also fulfils Simeon's expectation when he welcomed Jesus in the temple. "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed."

Why such hostility? The crowd was enthusiastic when Jesus announced the "gracious words" of liberty, recovery, freedom and the Lord's favour, because they thought it would all be theirs, as this prophet was clearly one of their own!

But Jesus, in claiming to be a prophet, refers to two episodes in which Elijah and Elisha performed powerful deeds for people who were not of the children of Israel, the Gentiles, people of other nationalities.

As we read this gospel we are told:

- of Jesus' message of universal salvation,

- of Simeon prophesying that Jesus would be "a light to the Gentiles", and
- of Luke quoting Isaiah to describe John the Baptist's Ministry — "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

However, this is the first time people in Jesus audience hear this! The hometown crowd is angered to discover that the blessings they had expected for themselves are to be shared with Gentiles. What is "good news" for the wider world is received as "bad news" by the people of Nazareth!

How often does this happen — when good news for others is perceived as bad news for ourselves? It seems to happen when there is an insecurity in ourselves, so that we perceive blessings for others as blessing "taken away" from us. So we protect our own ground.

Does this reveal a rather small and selfish view of God?

The argument about using Googong water for Goulburn seems to be symbolic of this! Our water, for which we have done precious little, is to be shared with people in greater need. Surely we don't own resources and, as the gifts of God, they should be shared!

There are no doubt other such issues, for instance the Kyoto agreement. Our Prime Minister insists that there be no decline in our own economy. We are not willing to take a step that may benefit the wider world, if it is going to mean we need to make a sacrifice.

Jesus' standing up against the crowd emphasises his love for the will of the father, his love for greater humanity, rather than for one favoured group — who should know that God's purpose is for the wider world.

Jesus' reference to Elijah and Elisha indicates that the greatest prophet (for that is how Elijah is seen) and his disciple had an awareness that God's love went beyond the children of the Hebrews. What Jesus says about the widow of Zarepath and Naaman the Syrian also points out that there is faith out there among the unknown and rejected ones, that God is active.

God is not restricted to our artificial religious boundaries. I think that in the last 50 years we have had to discover faith among Catholics and Baptists and Pentecostals and in other churches, not just in our own church. It seems that Jesus calls his people (not just those in the synagogue of Nazareth, but us today) to see beyond all religious boundaries and stereotypes.

It is rather sad that Tony Abbott on behalf of the government has politicised the faith issue by "having a go" at opposition leader Kevin Rudd. I would have thought a politician who claims to be a Christian ought to commend the faith of the opposition leader and

argue with him on the basis of various policies. I would have thought faith would lead to generosity of spirit, or "bigness" as Michael Palin would say.

We tend to use the word 'love' at these times. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians gives us a most practical definition! And he did so because some Christians among the congregation at Corinth saw themselves as better than others.

It's interesting that chapter 13 is obviously an insertion. Go to 12:31 and continue with 14:1, and it makes good sense. So it seems that chapter 13 has been written to enlarge on what love is and how it ranks above all else — more important than knowledge and faith, giving all way, even life itself.

Love is patient,
kind,
not envious (were the people of Nazareth envious of God blessing the Gentiles?),
not boastful,
not arrogant,
not rude,
does not insist on its own way,
is not irritable or resentful,
does not rejoice in wrongdoing,
but rejoices in the truth.

Love bears all things,
hopes all things,
believes all things,
endures all things.

Love never ends.

When we are tempted to be annoyed at God because we think God should treat us better, maybe we should read this passage, ponder it for ten minutes, and then make our confession for about two hours!