

Epiphany 4
28/01/2007

Mark the Evangelist

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

Living in the Love Unknown

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. After this positive beginning, what does it mean that by the end of the reading the same people were filled with murderous rage? The context is the commencement of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, after which he visited the synagogue in his home town, Nazareth, where he read Isaiah's words -

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives,
the recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*

Then he declared to his audience that, in their hearing, these words had been fulfilled. The claim was that the mission of Isaiah's Suffering Servant was being fulfilled in Jesus' life and work. Through him the poor were receiving good news. People were being healed: **released** from oppression and enslavement. The coming of the year of the Lord's favour meant that, in him, God was moving towards the people in **acceptance**. The forgiveness of sins, promised in the song of Zechariah, and in the preaching of John the Baptist, was being demonstrated before the world.

Luke is the gospel writer who tells the story of the prodigal son. We are not far from the mark if we see that for Luke humanity is like the prodigal, lost in a far country, and in Jesus, the anointed one, God has come in search of us, seeking to draw us to himself. Luke shows us what it means to be known and claimed by God. It is to be offered the gifts of freedom and healing, in the deepest sense of those words.

When Jesus set about his father's business in the Synagogue at Nazareth, at first, the people were dazzled by their local boy made good. They were pleased and astonished. The question: "Is this not Joseph's son?" is straightforward and not malicious. The crowd assume they know Jesus and what might be possible through him. They are neither aware of, nor ready for, the deeper character of his life to emerge.

When he was a babe Simeon predicted this mission would make Jesus a figure of contradiction, who would expose the thoughts of many hearts. In the next stage Jesus begins to challenge his audience. "...you will say to me: Doctor, cure yourself, do here what you did for those elsewhere." The implication seems to be that the Nazarenes thought they had some prior claim on his gifts. They attempt to control the grace at work in him. But he reminds them that prophets are not accepted in their own home-

town. He preached of the year of God's acceptance but, ironically, it would not extend to them being able to accept him for what he was.

What got them really going were the examples he used. "The truth is" he said, at times when people in Israel were in desperate need, none were helped. But God did care for Gentiles **who were open to the grace sent to them through prophets**. This was a lesson in what God is like! God loves in freedom, a freedom that can be seen in the history, not just of Israel, but of the world. The power of the Spirit reaches beyond the limits we set. For the audience the spell was broken. They were no longer confused about how to understand him. Hearing their own tradition, preached in this way by their local boy, inspired them to murderous rage. He became their enemy.

What caused this rage and spite? It was hearing that they did not have control over God's grace: the realization that they had to live in openness to something that came to them, undeservedly and without their aid. And it was hearing that the sovereignty of God stretched beyond the boundaries of Nazareth and Israel. Even if they would not, God would go there. If they were going to live according to this sovereignty, they had to give up the limits they had imposed on God. This meant they had to surrender some things dear to their hearts, and there was no room for self-righteousness. The gift of grace was **God's** privilege, not theirs. It claimed them for a service they did not choose, as it had done for the prophets of old. This meant deep things for their understanding of God. They had to remember that while God **is** known in Israel, the nature of that knowing left them always confronted by something unknown. Jesus gave them a fresh introduction to Love Unknown, and the consequence was a challenge to live in the liberality of grace.

What happened in the Synagogue at Nazareth was pivotal. Jesus came to his own, and they did not receive him. In the chapters following Luke shows how, in the events and doings of his life, Jesus embodied what Isaiah was talking about. He extended the healing and acceptance of God to those regarded as unworthy, only to arouse the indignation and rage of the religious elite. Nazareth prefigures the way Jesus was received in Jerusalem: at first with loud Hosannas, and then rejected and crucified.

At the end of this reading, when the crowd's fury was at its peak, Jesus "passed through their midst and went on his way". The church fathers would say this is an anticipation of the Resurrection. It shows that, even though in the end they did lay hands on him and he was put to death, God demonstrated that, in the face of the ultimate power we know, death, their power was no real power at all. The Resurrection is the sign that Jesus was not put to shame in the eyes of God.

If we read this story as showing how humanity treats the grace of God, the mystery is that God continues to express acceptance towards us. Furthermore, as Pentecost shows, God continues to empower the church to move towards the world with gracious, inclusive love. This is amazing grace, and there is nothing we can do but allow ourselves to be apprehended by it. Here is the love which fully knows us, and continues to accept us, even when we have refused the gift.

How can this message, and this gift of the knowledge of God result in the horror of shooting the messenger as it did? It happened because there is a human tendency, even amongst Christians and Christian leaders, to believe that God is best represented by our

version of things. In the endeavour to live by faith, we must indeed hold onto what we know about God, but we do this out of gratitude for a gift received, rather than because it is something we have worked out. And the knowledge of God as gift reveals that God remains wholly other. We see through a glass darkly. Our knowledge is partial. And yet, for all that, there will always be some way in which that knowledge holds a question to our life. It calls us to enter continually into a different imagination from the one that prevails in our context. With the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, faith, by its very nature, is not something we have decided upon to suit ourselves, it arises from being grasped by something we did not plan or expect. That is why some say, to live a Spiritual life involves being open to continual conversion, for we are always being called out from the place where we have settled. To live faithfully is, therefore, inherently a humble stance because the knowledge we have points as much to what we do not know, as to what we know. And it means that we live in an open system, one which to our peril, we always seek to close. May God have mercy on all our attempts to refuse grace, and set us free to live in the acceptance we have been given.