

Epiphany 4

January 31, 2010

O God be in my mouth as I speak for you and fill this place with your great grace that we may leave this place less of what we used to be and more of what we ought to be, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Before the “official business” part of our church staff meetings on Tuesdays, we gather together for a time of prayer and reflection on the upcoming selections from Holy Scripture.

I have always enjoyed hearing the various perspectives on the scripture that our church staff has and how the Bible speaks to them.

Of course, Melinda Mischik, our Christian Ed director for Children, usually looks at Mthr Mary and I and says okay, how do I make this lesson work for children’s chapel.

This is usually only a problem if the Gospel lesson involves plucking out your eye or cutting off your left or right hand.

This past week we were discussing Jesus’ tumultuous hometown return from St. Luke’s Gospel.

Most of us agreed that not much has changed when it comes to trying to get recognition from the local folks.

Ingrid mentioned that while her husband is well known around the world as one of the top amateur identifiers of super novas. (He even received a letter of praise from the late Carl Sagan.)

The local Astronomical society in Atlanta has largely ignored her husband's contributions to the field, never inviting him to lecture or formally recognizing his accomplishments.

In my own life, I recall starting on the path to ordination in the late 1980's. At first I was excited to find out how the process worked in my home diocese.

But very quickly I was told by various folks in the Diocese of Atlanta, that I was too young and too inexperienced to be a priest.

Of course, after almost 18 years, I am beginning to think maybe they were right.

And here is an experience that I am sure many of you have had in your life.

How many of you have ever tried to give advice to your parents as an adult?

If your experience is anything like mine, usually Mom and Dad either don't hear what you have said or they seem to ignore it.

Now there is a second part to this story. How many of you have seen your idea or suggestion resurface a few months later as Mom and Dad's own idea?

This is something I call "parental plagiarism". Drives me crazy.

Our human experience seems to confirm Jesus' observation that prophets are rarely honored in their own country or in their own hometown.

Before though examining the reasons for Jesus' hometown rejection, we should back up for a moment and look at last week's gospel. Because I believe both these stories are connected.

You may recall that prior to his being chased out of the synagogue Jesus reads a passage from the prophet Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

After reading Jesus tells his listeners in Nazareth, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

I am sure that when the hometown folks heard this message they must have been surprised.

The Romans were still occupying the land of Israel and Nazareth was a still a poor village without much to offer.

Good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, sight to the blind none of this appeared to be happening around them.

So we have to wonder, why Jesus would choose to make this kind of statement to them, especially since he knew it would be a hard sell in his own hometown.

Perhaps Jesus was just naïve early in his ministry. Maybe this was the same sermon he had given in the village next door. Maybe it had gone over well in other places.

Maybe Jesus even expected a warmer reception. It would have made mom proud for her son to be acclaimed and celebrated by the locals.

Yet Jesus spends little time trying to curry favor and instead moves quickly from the announcement of good news to a reminder of times in the past when the God of Israel had favored non-Jews.

He mentions two stories. One concerns a widow in Sidon whose son is healed during a great famine by Elijah. The other story speaks of a Syrian Naaman who is cured of his leprosy.

In both cases, a non-Jewish person receives grace or healing from God.

Most of his listeners would have expected God to favor his chosen people, the nation of Israel. But Jesus reminds them that their God is a God for all the people of the world.

Jesus uses the scripture of his own people to challenge their parochialism, and the limited way they think that God works in the world.

The Isaiah selection from last week's gospel reminds his listeners that God's hope and God's vision for the world is much grander than anything they could possibly conceive.

It is not just meant for Israel but is good news for everyone, Jew and Greek, slave and free, men and women, tax collector and prostitute.

As I said last week, Jesus announces to the world that God's grace, God's love taking action in the world extends to everyone, even people that the hometown folks might not like or have over for dinner.

Scholars tell us that this section from St. Luke helps set the stage for the Gentile mission.

It justifies Jesus' evangelism of the Pagan world by highlighting a story when his own people rejected him.

While I understand this perspective, I do believe that it is a limited and narrow reading of the gospel.

If we read this lesson only this way, we are no better than the hometown folks that first heard the message.

Their parochialism becomes ours and this lesson has the danger of making us feel spiritually self-satisfied and comfortable.

Isn't it great that Jesus took his mission to the Gentiles and aren't we lucky that we unlike the Jewish people didn't reject him.

The lesson actually can if we are not careful, be used to justify self-righteousness which Jesus has little patience for either.

I believe St. Luke has another more subtle agenda.

By placing Jesus in his hometown and among his own people, he reminds his readers that all of us have had similar experiences.

If you have ever tried to go home again on your spiritual journeys, you too, have been in Jesus' shoes.

We have dealt with rejection. We have felt pain, disappointment and most of us know the bitter sting of failure.

Our experiences might be a little different but at some root level, we have at times found ourselves like Jesus on the run for our lives.

St. Luke shares this story with us, so that we might come to understand our own story better.

So that we may not lose our openness to those in need and never forget that Jesus' message of good news is for those who may reject us and those who we may choose to reject.

St. Luke reminds us that the path of discipleship is not easy and there is a cost to being a follower of our Lord.

Jesus proclaims good news to those who are willing to hear. Jesus proclaims sight for those who want to see, and freedom to those who are held captive by sin.

Let us pray that we never lose the capacity to preach that news to all people and more importantly never lose our ability to hear the good news of Christ coming from others.

Amen