

“When Familiarity Breeds Contempt”

*A sermon on Luke 4:21-30 & 1 Corinthians 13
by the Revd Paul Matheson February 3, 2019*

It’s quite a flip-flop, isn’t it? Just like that, the crowd changed their mind about Jesus.

It was the Sabbath day. And Jesus, like any good Jewish person, was in the synagogue. The folks at Nazareth were glad to see him there. “Look, Betty. Isn’t that Mary and Joseph’s boy? He’s been gone for a while. But look at him now — all grown up. I think he’s going to speak.”

Jesus took the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and read aloud. Oh how he read! With a voice strong and clear, full of authority, his words echoed through the synagogue:

“Good news to the poor,” he said. “Release to captives. Recovery of sight to the blind. This,” said Jesus, “is the year of God’s favour!”

Never before had they heard those words spoken in such a way. There was hardly a dry eye in the house. Everyone said it was the best service they had been to in years. It gave you a lift. Sent you home with a feeling that maybe things would go a little better this week.

They all lined up at the door to greet him. “Nice sermon, Jesus. It’s so good to have you back. You done good, boy.”



Now any preacher will tell you how nice it feels to receive those compliments. But being a prophet, a spokesperson for God, can be dangerous business.

The problem was this: Jesus let it slip that God’s Good News was intended for all people — not just Jews but ungodly Gentiles too! Yes, Jesus insisted, God’s love extends even to the Syrians and the Lebanese, those hated enemies of Israel.

So that mood of joyful congratulation quickly shifted to one of shock and dismay.

Yet Jesus didn’t back down. He was sure God’s love extended to all people, that it was meant to go beyond boundaries that we routinely establish.

He even had scripture to back it up — stories that were well-known to the crowd in the synagogue. “Remember,” he mused, “how, in a time of famine, God’s prophet Elijah gave food to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon? And another prophet, Elisha, helped a Syrian, an official member of the royal court, receive a cure for leprosy.”



Well, the silence was deafening. Scripture or no scripture, this was not what people wanted to hear. The crowd grew red in the face and started shouting. Angry fists were waved. They marched Jesus out the door. Some were planning to push him off a cliff. Yet somehow, he managed to slip away.

Does it surprise you how quickly Jesus’ friends and neighbours could turn on him? You know this isn’t the only incident that scripture records.

Come Palm Sunday, the crowds will line up four or five deep to catch a glimpse of Jesus as he rides into Jerusalem. And come Good Friday those same cheering throngs will be clamouring for his crucifixion.

Makes you wonder, doesn’t it, where we stand in all this. We church people, we who call ourselves Christians. We who faithfully come to worship. The hometown crowd.

Are we going to turn on him? Where do we locate ourselves within this passage of scripture?

It’s a strange thing, but familiarity can often breed contempt. The people who came to the synagogue that Sabbath day thought they knew him. But they didn’t.



And that should give us pause to consider: Are there times when we too make assumptions about Jesus? When we think we have him all figured out?

“We know him.”

Be careful, this scripture warns us!

Can you remember going home to visit family? Perhaps you’d been away at school and were returning during a break. Or maybe you’d gone and married someone, had kids, established a home of your own. And you go back to visit. And they treat you like a 12 year old! Pour you milk. Tell you when it’s time to go to bed.

It's not their fault! That's how they remember you. They don't know the places you've been, the things you've learned, the relationships you've formed along the way. They don't know about the person you've become.

In their eyes you are still the little boy or the little girl who used to sit and bounce upon their knee. And you are. But you are also a whole lot more.



All of us are more than the labels people put upon us. We are unique persons. We can't simply be pigeonholed. And neither can Jesus.

He's been away and got baptised, spent some time in the desert, wrestled with demons, listened to the voice of God. And now, when he comes back home again, he's filled to overflowing with the vision of God's brilliant new world. He tries to share it with people who can't see beyond themselves. No wonder he runs into trouble.

“We shall all perish,” writes John Stendahl, “if we cannot see a larger world”ⁱ

We need to be careful, whenever we catch ourselves claiming to know Jesus. Because there is always more to this Jesus than we think. And he will come to us in surprising ways. With a vision that is bigger, larger, more beautiful, more magnificent than we had ever imagined.

If you think you can use Jesus to support your own plan and programme for life, your own political scheme, your own petty prejudice — forget it. If that's what you're trying to do, he is bound to cause offence.

The people of Nazareth had their own ideas. And as long as Jesus played by their rules, fulfilling their expectations, everything went along just swimmingly. “Nice sermon, Jesus. You'll have to come back and tell us what we want to hear again sometime.”

But as soon as Jesus stepped out of line. As soon as he said something that shook their world and challenged their pre-conceptions, they reacted against him violently. We have ways of getting rid of people like that.



The truth is that we have tried to domesticate Jesus and make him our own. Nations have used him to support their wars. Political parties have invoked his name to rally people to their cause. In the name of Jesus, even the churches have made pronouncements and committed acts they later came to regret.

In Canada, we are involved in a process of reconciliation with our indigenous people. We're beginning to come to terms with the harms that have been caused through a system of residential schools that was administered by many of the churches.

In these schools, children were forcibly removed from their families, punished for using their own language and made to feel ashamed of their culture. Many died of disease. Some were physically and sexually abused.

And all of it was wrong.

We have each, in our own personal lives, tried to bend Christ to our control. And perhaps been disappointed when we learned we can't.

Beware, people of Nazareth, when you look upon this home-town boy with pleasure. When you start to speak well of him. When the Service Club invites him to dinner. When the Chamber of Commerce wants to name him as a good-will ambassador to promote tourism and local industry.

Jesus will not be used. There's an astonishing freedom that Jesus possesses. He is not beholden to the powers that be. His loyalty belongs not to Nazareth, or to its synagogue, or to the elders, or even to his family and friends. He answers to a higher power.

"Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar," Jesus once advised. "But give to God what belongs to God."



What would happen, I wonder, if Jesus came to visit us — in Canada, where I live, or here in Melbourne where you live? What if you invited him to be your guest preacher next Sunday morning? What kind of response would he receive?

Would you demand that he become like you? Or would you have the good sense to listen ... so that you might become like him?



This scripture offers us a gracious invitation. To go beyond a superficial knowing of Jesus. To begin to know him as he is, not just as we want him to be.

How can we do this? By opening ourselves to one another. Listening, learning — even from those we least expect to reveal the truth of God to us. For it is often they who are God's prophets.

They speak hard words we need to hear. They show us a way we need to follow.

We can do it by striving to make our communities more inclusive. Becoming more welcoming of the stranger, and the outsider, and the ones we have shut out.

We can do it by praying. Taking time to be with Christ and getting to know him better. Letting our defences down. Allowing Jesus into the deep places of our lives. Discerning how to distinguish his voice from our own, or from the culture around us — which is no easy task. And learning that even when he says hard things it always for our good, and ultimately for our healing.

And always out of love.

We can do this by learning how to love. This morning we heard those wonderful words from the apostle Paul about faith, hope and love abiding.

God's love opens us to one another. And to God. And to a bright new world where ancient hostilities are put to rest. Where the poor receive good news. Where captives are set free from things that keep us in prison. Where the blind can see new things. And where the year of God's favour takes on a fresh new ring. An immediacy ...

So that ancient texts — like this one — can be heard in a way we never imagined possible. And the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus becomes present in our very midst.

May it be so as we gather to feast at the table this night. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

ⁱ The Christian Century, January 21, 1998, p.53.