

2016-01-24 Sue Diggory
Epiphany 3
Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
Jesus is rejected at Nazareth

Luke 4 vv 14 – 21
I Cor 12 12 – 31a

Today is the fourth of the five Epiphany moments, moments of great revelation about who Jesus is, that we celebrate at this time of year; the arrival of the Magi, those mysterious gentile visitors from the east who came to worship the infant Jesus, followed by the Baptism of Christ, when the Spirit descended on Jesus, as he heard those amazing words 'You, are my Son, the beloved: with you I am well pleased,' and last week when the first of John's signposts pointing to who Jesus is as we celebrated an outpouring of the abundance of God as water became wine at the Wedding Feast in Cana, and finally next week Candlemas and the Presentation of Christ at the Temple.

And so to to day when Jesus *"filled with the power of the Spirit,"* the same Spirit, the Holy Spirit that descended on him at this baptism, returns to his home town after preaching and teaching in the local synagogues around Galilee. We are told that it is the Sabbath and *"as was his custom"* Jesus went to the synagogue, a place where he was well known, a place he had most likely attended all his life, a place where he not only attended the service but participated in it as all adult men were allowed to do.

By the first century there were synagogues in most towns, in fact anywhere where 10 men wished to constitute themselves as leaders of one. Priests were not involved in their leadership as they were lay led and the Pharisees had a prominent role here, but the synagogue was more than simply a place for worship, it was a school where the scriptures were taught as well as the local community centre, so it is clear that Jesus and his family would have been very well known by the local 'worshipping' community, a place where word would have spread; not only about his preaching but about the miracle at Cana, a place not far from Nazareth. Expectation would have been in the air, would something exceptional happen today as he returned home? Would they be witness to a miracle? Would they see and experience some of the things they had been hearing about?

Did Jesus choose the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah or was it handed to him, that we don't know but the reading of those words defined his mission, his manifesto, how he was to fulfil his messianic role?

*"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 of the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."*

These would have been very well known words. They were written over 600 years earlier at a time when God's people were living in exile, at a time when the people needed hope for the future, these were words that down through the years had brought hope that one day, one day the Messiah, one day the anointed one would come, and one day he would bring in the year of the Lord's favour, the time of Jubilee referred to in the Old Testament book of Leviticus, the time that would bring the restoration that they longed for, the restoration of Israel as God's chosen people, and freedom from the oppression that they suffered under Roman rule.

No wonder the people the people were waiting to hear what Jesus would do or say next.

After rolling up the scroll and handing it back he sits down, the customary position for preaching. What was he going to say ... what would be his interpretation be of this promise that they knew was for them the Jews, the ancient people of God.

Jesus might have preached on the wisdom of the old prophet, or might have looked to the future and spoken about how like Isaiah we are longing for this day to come, the day when kingdom of God will come, how one day a better future will come as promised, how one-day God's chosen people Israel will be restored and their enemies will be overthrown, but he simply said what for them would have been shocking words *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

It is hard for us to imagine how shocking that was, no wonder as we read on in Luke we hear first that they were amazed at such words coming from 'Joseph's son,' one of their own, but that their amazement soon turned to anger as Jesus showed how God's favour is not just for Israel, not just for the Jews, not words that they were expecting to hear and in their fury they wanted to drive him out of town, and throw him off a cliff!

They were unable to accept that the fulfilment of God's promise had not come as they expected, they were unable to accept the reality of 'today' as they looked back to the promise of the past and hankered for the future to be fulfilled in the way they wanted, rather than in the 'today' way that the manifesto that was being proclaimed by Jesus. This was not what the people of Nazareth wanted to hear. Rejected in his home town, but undeterred Jesus goes on his way and heads to Capernaum where he continues to preach his message, his mission manifesto, the same message, the same mission manifesto, the same unbending and unchanging mission manifesto that we are called to follow today.

I suspect we often behave in a similar way to the people of Nazareth. It is easy to make assumptions about God, to assume that the way we do things is the right way and that others should fit in with us and our ideas, so it seems very appropriate that we should be pondering this passage during the week of prayer for Christian Unity, a week when we think about the world-wide church.

Some of us have had the opportunity to attend times of worship and prayer in some of the other Churches this week, and you will not be surprised to know that not everyone does it in exactly the same way as us, not even at the Parish Church in Edenbridge, their morning

prayer comes from a different book to the one we use!

And for others of us if you came to hear Mike Fawcett from the Diocesan Mission Partnership Group talk to us about the possibility of a link with a parish in Mwapwa Diocese, we heard about the very different style of worship they experience, with drums, dancing and often a service that lasts 3 hours or more. Very different to what we are doing here this morning, very different to what goes on in the other churches in Edenbridge, yet it is also the same, because at the heart of their worship is the same 'mission manifesto' that is at the heart of our worship, it is the same Jesus, who came to the Nazareth synagogue that day and took the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and said *"Today" "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

The people of Nazareth couldn't cope with Jesus' *'Today,'* they couldn't cope with the idea that they were not the only people who were special to God, can we? I hope we can, and I pray that not only as the church here, but as part of the wider Christian community, both in Edenbridge and through the Diocese we will be those who are not only able to accept the mission manifesto that was being fulfilled in the Nazareth synagogue, but are those who are prepared to work for its fulfillment, both today and into the future.

Amen.