

## **Sunday 2nd February 2025 - Sermon: Luke 4.22-30 - Alex Johnson**

Last week, Alan reminded us of the old vow of membership within the Church of Scotland which asked members to be diligent in applying the means of grace. Alan saw this paralleled in the first part of the story of Jesus' participation in the synagogue in Nazareth. Firstly, Jesus was there "according to his custom" demonstrating a commitment to the community of faith. Secondly, he showed familiarity with the Scriptures, demonstrating that the Word of God (capital double-u) read the word of God (lowercase double-u). These are important means through which we encounter God and hear God speaking.

Yet, the story takes a turn following the verses that we read last week and it is revealed that a room full of people diligently participating in the community of faith, many of whom must have had a high level of Biblical literacy, nonetheless fail to respond positively to the revelation of God who stands before them.

So where do things go wrong? Why did the people gathered in Nazareth that day become so incensed by what Jesus said that they were willing to commit murder over it? Is there a gap between being "diligent in applying the means of grace" and following Jesus?

The mood turns very quickly in this passage. Jesus says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Which is quite the statement, but not necessarily going too far. After all, does that statement necessarily mean Jesus is the fulfilment? Or just that the time has come for it to be fulfilled? As Jesus kept speaking, Luke records that those listening to him were amazed by the gracious words that Jesus spoke.

Sure, they knew him as Joseph's son, but it was clear something had changed in this man.

Therefore, it is what Jesus says next that boils everyone's blood. Jesus clearly sees that these people who knew him from Adam, who could clearly recognise the authority with which he spoke, nonetheless fail to understand. Despite their attention and their positive assessment of his sermon they are not listening. Perhaps, all the stuff about doctors and prophets not being accepted in their hometown suggests they are wanting miracles, which Jesus refuses to give them, but whatever the cause, Jesus challenges their identity as the people of God by referencing two stories from the books of Kings and in so doing enrages them.

The first is the story of the widow of Zarephath. This is at a low point in Israel's history. King Ahab, who stands in a dynasty of kings who each abandon the covenant, is described as doing “more to provoke the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him.” (1 Kings 16:33) This is the king who marries the Sidonian Jezebel, who it is claimed led Ahab astray. As such, Elijah proclaims a drought across the whole land. At first he goes to live in a wadi, but when the water dries up, Elijah is directed to Zarephath in Sidon to live with a widow and her son, all of whom are sustained by God throughout the rest of the drought.

This story strips Israel's unfaithfulness to the covenant bare. Not just because God looks after the widow, a non-Israelite, while subjecting Israel to drought, but because that widow, who has faith, shares an identity with the queen, Jezebel. They are both Sidonian. Therefore,

Ahab cannot pin his unfaithfulness to the covenant on his foreign wife, he is responsible for himself, clearly demonstrated by the fact that here we have a Sidonian who acts in faith. This story exposes the unfaithfulness of Ahab but also any excuse that Ahab might offer for that unfaithfulness. This story is like the classic nightmare of going to school without your trousers on. It is one of utter exposure.

The second story develops the theme. Naaman, a successful military man under the king of Aram, he suffers from leprosy and wishes to be healed. He takes a gamble and goes to Israel wondering if the Lord might heal him. Elisha, Elijah's successor, sends a missive to go and wash in the Jordan. This doesn't sit well with Naaman, who is insulted, perhaps because Elisha sent instructions rather than turning up in person, but also because he doesn't see what should be so magical about the waters of the Jordan. However, persuaded by his servant, Naaman washes and is healed.

So we have another story of God showing favour to a non-Israelite, but we also have the story of someone getting annoyed by what God, through Elisha, asks of them. Yet, in the end, is faithful to the command.

Placed back into Jesus' context in the synagogue of Nazareth, we have the accusation that the unfaithful Israelites at the very lowest point of Israel's history are parallels of those in the synagogue that day. Furthermore, unlike Naaman, they are unable to retain their composure amidst such an insult, and therefore obey, repent, and be baptised. The undertone of which is that the favour of God will therefore be shared with the Gentiles like the widow of Zarephath and Naaman, who are capable of responding in faith.

Does the sudden escalation make sense now? Jesus is being rude or, at the very least, challenging their assumptions about what it means to be the people of God. We're missing an account of what Jesus saw in them that day that caused him to say such stark words, but we see the outcome of it as they attempt to throw Jesus off a cliff.

This episode is paradigmatic for the Gospel of Luke, which perhaps explains why the writer moves it from where Mark and Matthew have it in the middle of Jesus' ministry to the very beginning. So the gaps left in this particular episode can be filled by reading the rest of Jesus' story. Luke is saying that this is what Jesus faced throughout his ministry. People fail to accept the message of Jesus to the point of murderous intent and Jesus' ministry points towards all that the writer will record in Acts; that the people of God will expand from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth.

So, what does it mean to be diligent in applying the means of grace? After all, the people in the synagogue that day were applying at least one aspect of it, they were there, within the community of believers, ostensibly to hear the voice of God. Yet it left them angry, not liberated. It encouraged them in their obstinance rather than in their obedience.

Perhaps, we need to remember, as made clear in the vow itself, that these things are the means not the ends of grace. We participate in the church and are committed to reading our Bible because they point us towards the actual object of our worship, Jesus. We try not to let our status as church attending, Bible reading Christians obscure our pursuit

of the person of Christ. Rather, we anticipate the person of Christ appearing before us through these means.

For if we are to claim to be witnesses to the extension of God's grace beyond the Israelites, we must also be careful to acknowledge our own capacity for hubris. For as we orientate ourselves within the narrative, we most naturally fit as those gathered in the synagogue that day. We identify with those who called for Jesus' death.

And so we recognise too that these encounters with God may not always be comfortable, we may be left with Naaman choice; to be offended or be obedient. We may have to lean more heavily on God's faithfulness to us than on our faithfulness to him, just as all people have had to do since we left the garden of Eden.

In some sense I feel bad, I don't think God is particularly asking me to condemn you this morning. In the preparation for this service, I didn't get the sense that it is my job to beat you round the head with this. So perhaps, it is simply the reminder to keep ourselves open to what God is saying, to resist the temptation to constrain it within our established expectations, to be excited rather than defensive about what God is doing.

It is to this end that I draw attention to another of Luke's themes. For it was the Holy Spirit that descended on Jesus during his baptism, that led him into the wilderness, that equipped him to begin his ministry in Galilee, and rested upon him as he proclaimed the Gospel. Perhaps we have need, as a congregation who profess to be the people of God,

stand as representative of Christ body, and gather around the Bible, perhaps we have need of the Spirit among us.

And if this sermon has come across as too critical, this then is the other side of the coin. Despite our attendance in the synagogue that day, the Holy Spirit is offered to us that we might reunite ourselves with the God we worship and so become beautiful instruments of God's grace. By the presence of the Spirit, here among us, we become a means of grace. We are not destined to be inhibitors of the Gospel but participants within it. That after all is our collective calling to which we are equipped by the Spirit, just as Jesus was.

So we diligently attend church, read our Bibles, and a host of other practices, that we might better know Jesus. And in so doing, we may open ourselves to the Spirit of God and not to the spirit of evil. Thereby clothing ourselves in the likeness of Christ, embodying the new creation begun in the resurrection of Jesus.

And so we pray, today and for the rest of our lives, Lord, let your Spirit come.

Amen.