

*They'll know we are
Christians by our love...*



St Aidan's Uniting Church
2nd February 2025
Epiphany 4

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Luke 4:21-30

Reflection

When I was reading around today's lectionary readings, there were a couple of quotes that stood out. One we have already heard as an introduction to the Gospel reading. The second is this:

"The beginning of Jesus' ministry also marks the beginning of hostility to him. He teaches and later heals. The crowds find him pleasant and welcome his skills. When the teaching turns threatening, however, suggesting that they themselves need repentance or suggesting the inclusion of the excluded and marginalised, the response becomes anything but one of welcome."

It's interesting to see where this hostility starts. Certainly, the question that is asked in response to the preaching could be read either way: Isn't this Joseph's son? All too often in our modern culture we read this with a note of derision. This is Joseph's son, and we knew him as a child, taught him all he knows, changed his nappies, held him as he learnt to walk, and waved him off on his way to his first adult job. How on earth can he think that he is telling us something new about the God we taught him about – and how can he think that these words are fulfilled today?

On the other hand, we could also read this response as words of amazement: Wow! Look at how little Jesus has grown up, and just think, we were part of this. Listen to how he is using his learning and has developed such amazing wisdom for a lad his age. I wonder what he will make of himself – I hope he isn't constrained by the fact he is from Nazareth. And just think, he is Joseph's son, the son of a labourer and he is doing all this!

Perhaps the author writes this response in a way that is deliberately ambiguous: how we read the response tells us more about ourselves and our life experiences (and therefore what we project) than about what the people of the day thought. I wonder if this was why the author chose an ambiguous response – to encourage that first audience to reflect on how they hear the passage and how they too respond.

Regardless of the thought behind the amazement that Joseph's son was saying these things, the next thing that happens is that Jesus picks a bit of a fight. He points out that God's love is not limited to the "right" people – the people of Israel. God's love has already been demonstrated to the peoples of surrounding vulnerable peoples of the surrounding countries.

What on earth prompted this reaction? Imagine hearing this for the very first time and not knowing what is coming next. It would be a very unexpected response: Truly, no prophet is accepted in their hometown. There is not even a hint of why this came up (unless, of course, we go with our modern interpretation of asking "isn't this Joseph's son.") Jesus then reminds the people of the stories of old where it was foreigners who were helped and healed, while there would have been plenty of options at home.

The first audience of this Gospel were gentiles; people who were not acceptable in Jewish culture because they did not keep the Torah. Some – or even many – may have originally been "God-fearers," the name given to those who attended the synagogue, learnt about the Jewish God, but did not convert. Here in Christianity they found a home that allowed them to become full members of the religious

community. It means that right from the start of the Gospel, the author affirms the importance of these outsiders and their experiences of God's love and compassion.

What does all this mean for us today? On a world scale, I think I resonated with that quote about hostility because although it was written in 1994, it seemed written for the response last week to the Lutheran Bishop who asked Trump to show compassion. We are facing a world that needs kindness and compassion. When that shows up people for who they really are, we can expect anger and hostility. Will we have the courage to respond with God's loving option?

On a small scale, we are about to start a new connecting point to our community. Will we acknowledge the ways that people have already experienced God in their lives? Will we think we have the right answers, or can we hold them in their exploration? It is something that can be difficult, especially if we experience challenge to our presumptions.

In our Epistle readings, Paul wrote to a church in conflict. There were too many arguments between the people and as a result, Paul had to write multiple letters (most of which are lost) to try to sort out this fractured community. Having used a common image to remind people that all members are equal in the church, and all gifts have an important place, goes on to write about what is most important. I think we need to hear this again for our time; we need to reflect on these words as we look to building a connection to our community.

1 Corinthians 13