**‘He passed through their midst’**

*Cuddesdon, Friends and Former Members Day – Friday 24th May 2024*

*It takes a village to raise a child*. That was the title of a book published in 1996 by Hillary Clinton. It set out her views on how children’s nurture requires interaction with a whole community of people to achieve fullness and security. The phrase was allegedly derived from ‘an African proverb,’ though the original has never been found. The book was controversial (not surprisingly given its authorship), and it provoked several conservative ripostes, with titles like *It takes a family to raise a child.*

Whether it is indeed an African proverb or not, maybe the sentiment that ‘It takes a village to raise a child’ was in the minds of the villagers of Nazareth as they gathered in their synagogue to listen to the gifted young rabbi who had grown up among them. Surely they must have felt proud of their influence on this local celebrity. Together, they would be telling themselves, they had shaped him in the values and traditions of their community. Doubtless he would graciously acknowledge that when he addressed the congregation. So, ‘the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.’

But, of course, after setting the stage Luke goes on to describe the rude awakening that awaited them. Words of grace came from his mouth indeed, but not the grace that cajoles or reassures: ‘No prophet is accepted in his home town,’ he snarled. Worse than that, he really annoyed them by talking about neighbouring Capernaum. They had been looking forward to hearing their man speak as they expected him to, but he would have none of it.

As well as being really annoying, this returning native is elusive. This becomes clear as the confrontation intensifies. The villagers take him up to the top of the cliff, their former pride has turned to bitter resentment as they plan to throw him down. But, Luke says mysteriously, ‘he passed through the midst of them.’ Their sense of ownership of him had not been able to restrain him, and now their repudiation of him cannot destroy him.

‘He passed through the midst of them’ – what was true of Jesus then is true of him now; he passes through the midst of us. Just as the people of Nazareth tried to constrain him within the limited horizons of their own expectations, and he would have none of it, so we in our time try to constrain him within the limited horizons of our own understanding, and he will have none of that either. In the Church of England – for whose ministry this wonderful place trains and forms men and women – we try to do that in differing ways as we shape a Jesus according to our different predilections. Bishop Rowan, when Archbishop of Canterbury, once posed the question – to General Synod, of all people – ‘Does the Church of England exist?’ He answered himself by pointing out that ‘there are several different Churches of England.’ They do not always relate well to one another. But what they have in common is that each provides its adherents with a limited understanding of who Jesus is.

So, ask yourself: when you heard that famous gospel passage read, of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth, what phrase particularly struck you; and what image of Jesus did that convey to you? I can think of at least four answers to those questions which I have heard people offer at various times; maybe you can think of some others too.

First, there is the prophetic verse which Jesus reads: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.’ Surely, this is a moment of being seized by power from on high; a charismatic moment of exalted possession overtakes Jesus, and empowers him to speak with an authority beyond human possibility. Perhaps the lectionary we use today is nudging us towards this kind of reading, as it pairs the Nazareth episode with the story from Numbers of the Spirit falling on Eldad and Medad, even though they were the wrong people in the wrong place.

Jesus is the right person in the right place to receive the Spirit. No less than three times in this one chapter of Luke, there is reference to the Spirit of God resting on, or filling him, with supernatural power. Here in the synagogue he demonstrates that charismatic power in impassioned preaching Then he goes off – to Capernaum, of all places - to show the Spirit’s works also in exorcisms and in healings.

For those who read the gospel this way, the whole point is that the Holy Spirit is being poured out in a new way in and through Jesus. Given under the old covenant in ecstatic form to prophets and to others, now that Spirit invades the world in a deeper and more lasting way through Jesus – and he makes it available to us, the people of his new covenant, in signs and wonders today. All can experience the powerful and extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, and to do so is the mark of the true disciple of Jesus.

But what about starting somewhere else in reading this text? Luke says that Jesus ‘went to synagogue on the sabbath day as was his custom.’ This young man is a regular attender at the liturgical assembly of the people of God. Not only that, he is a young man who knows just what to do in terms of proper ritual: ‘He rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant.’ He has been well trained.

This reading presents Jesus to us as one who over his thirty hidden years growing up in Nazareth has cultivated a disciplined rhythm of prayer and worship. He has received with gratitude the ancient traditions of the community of faith, and through his regular commitment he has let them shape the pattern of his life. The scroll Jesus handles so reverently is sacramental of the riches of religion; if you have been in a synagogue for the feast of *Simchat Torah*, the completion of the recitation of the Law, you will know how deeply felt is the Jewish joy of attachment to the Torah scrolls.

But that deep sense of sacramental presence is what we also need in as Christians. Without being fluent in the grammar of liturgy, without disciplining ourselves in a long-term pattern of structured spirituality, we cannot begin to understand what it means to share in the life which God offers to us through Jesus our high priest.

For others, though, the point to this passage is not Sacrament but Word, and Word understood as message: ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,’ Jesus proclaims with firm conviction. Here is a man well versed in the Word of God as that is set down in the Hebrew Scriptures. He knows his Bible through and through, and by a strong, compelling logic he can find the key to this text from Isaiah. Jesus shows his divine accreditation by the way in which he can declare the authoritative interpretation of a written message which God has already delivered, and can then provide proof of its truth and consistency. Jesus is a young man who is sound in his teaching.

And, on this view, we today are still in need of just such clear and irrefutable teaching. In the Bible, God has given us the immeasurable gift of scriptures with a clear structure of truth. There can be no room for ambiguity or confusion here. The primary task of Christian ministry is to study and interpret that truth, and the primary goal of Christian discipleship is to apply it practically in the daily living of our lives.

So we have so far: Jesus 1, charismatic bearer of the Spirit; Jesus 2, faithful worshipper according to sacramental tradition; Jesus 3, authoritative teacher of biblical truth.

And then there is Jesus 4, perhaps the commonest way seeing him in the Church of England today. Jesus 4 starts from the description of his mission in the prophetic words of Isaiah – ‘to bring good news to the poor, release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour’. This stirring call to liberation and empowerment has become known as the ‘Nazareth Manifesto.’ It places Jesus unambiguously alongside those on the margins, those who bear the burden of an unjust and oppressive way of organising society, those who are excluded from the good things which some take for granted.

Here is Jesus the radical social activist, the subversive troubler of established order, the one whose Kingdom will upturn accepted values. And we in turn, who call ourselves Christians, should be infected by the same spirit of protest and turbulence: the church, on this view of matters, is called to be a community which is not afraid to challenge cultural norms where they stand in the way of fullness of life for all God’s children; we are to champion those despised by the world. And who can argue with that?

Four very differing pictures of Jesus – the charismatic, the traditional, the biblical, the radical. Each in turn will and does appeal to different Christians – sometimes it can feel as if we are living in different churches, even following different lords. But we are not.

Is it a problem that there are four differing views of Jesus on offer? Not necessarily; after all, the Church has long recognised that the existence of four canonical Gospels enriches our understanding of who Jesus is. The differences only become a problem if we insist that our view is the only one with truth in it, and so fail to recognise the truth in the others. There is truth in each; but, as that great but obscure Anglican theologian F D Maurice said, in one of his more lucid utterances: ‘A man is most often right in what he affirms, and wrong in what he denies.’

The tendency is strong among us to deny: to dismiss or ignore the aspects of Jesus which we find difficult or uncongenial. But if we do that, we fall retrospectively into the same trap as the villagers of Nazareth: we try to constrain Him within the limits of our own inadequate understanding. That does not do justice to Him, and it also fails to honour our brothers and sisters who see things through a different lens – and so it makes us miss out on the enrichment which our different approaches and presuppositions can bring to one another. But, if we take Jesus seriously, he will not let us stay content in our ecclesiastical sub-ghettoes. When we try to capture Him in terms which feel comfortable to us, He refuses to be bound by our limited conceptions, and ‘passes through the midst of us,’ as at Nazareth.

To put it another way, He challenges us to follow Him on a path of discipleship which will lead us into a fuller and deeper appreciation of who He is; and in doing that, it will also expand our vision of who we are and what the Church is for – even that puzzling, infuriating, endearing part of the Church which is the Church of England. We cannot say in this life what that vision will look like, because it is always being enlarged as we keep on encountering the risen Christ. But we can be open in our following of Jesus to see that others very different from us follow him too; and the enrichment that brings is for me one of the blessings Cuddesdon can offer to the Church of England, as men and women are shaped here for ministry in a place where they expect to learn from those different from them.

At the beginning of the last century, Albert Schweitzer set himself to chronicle and criticise the attempts of the German scholarship of his time to paint a clear picture of the ‘historical Jesus.’ He pointed out how everybody read back into the evidence the image that each wanted to see there; and his conclusion was that the reality of Jesus would always remain beyond the limits of our concepts. Despite the way the language rather grates on the ear, Schweitzer’s final words speak to us today, because the Jesus who passes through the midst of us is also the one who invites us to follow after Him:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old by the lakeside He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: ‘Follow thou me!’ and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

That is a journey of experience which is still going on for me forty two years after I left this holy hill; for some of you the learning will be longer, for some more lies in wait; but I thank God for this place, which opened my eyes to the ineffable mystery of the Lord who invites us to follow him on so many different paths as he passes through the midst of us.