

Epiphany 4 Luke 4:21-30

Our gospel reading this morning is part of the same incident we listened to last week. Jesus was at the synagogue, at a normal worship service in his home town. He hadn't long begun his ministry and was getting quite a name for himself in the greater Galilee region and it was going well, everyone praised him, we are told. Then he went home, to his own synagogue filled with the family, friends and neighbours with whom he had lived, worked and grown up.

Last week we heard how Jesus stood up to read, he was back after a period of absence and you can imagine the keenness to have a young man amongst them reading scripture, it was much like it is for us when new people arrive at or return to church, we can't wait to get them involved and on a roster! So, Jesus reads from the prophecy of Isaiah, a quote he then confirms is about himself, that the spirit of the Lord has anointed him to do works on God's behalf, to set captives free and to heal the sick. And initially the people were impressed, he amazed them with his confidence and grace filled words but that didn't last long.

Pretty soon people begin to question, hang on, isn't this Joseph's son, we know this man, he's no Pharisee. And Jesus goes on to warn them that he will be unable to do some of the things he has been doing elsewhere amongst them because it is impossible for them to see him as he is, they will always see him as he was. By the end of the reading the crowd was stirred up against him so much so that they were ready to throw him off a cliff! He had a point when he told them that a prophet is never accepted in their home town.

But it's human nature, isn't it? We have very long memories, particularly for things people don't do well. Rising to any type of leadership from amongst those with whom you have previously fitted in will always be jarring and difficult. It's the same in the workplace when a humble worker gets elevated to a supervisory role, suddenly those who were your friends and colleagues become a bit suspicious of you, you are no longer one of us. It's the same in ministry, those who are ordained often do everything they can to not lead communities from which they were sent for training, it's not always possible but it is always desirable. The draw is to go back to the familiar but the risk is we never truly grow to our potential in their home parishes.

But we are people of forgiveness, you might be thinking, Jesus is clear that we shouldn't have long memories when it comes to someone else's past. That's where the passage from St. Paul's letter to the church in Corinth shows us the way. Our human nature sees us fall into these habits of holding on to the past but the transforming power of God's love is the only way to truly break free of it. Living by love it becomes very clear that it is impossible to bear a grudge, to keep score of wrongs, to do anything but forgive and accept people just as they are. When we hear again St. Paul's words surely few could argue against the picture he paints being idyllic, in our minds we conjure up a picture of what a community that lives by this love looks like and it is very good. It is a place where people make mistakes, that part is inevitable, but having made them they are acknowledged, resolved and everyone moves on. It is a community of relationships which look like the one we share with God, where we are loved so much that however we come to God, whatever the state of our mind, our behaviour, our self-esteem, we are accepted and loved and the transformative change in us occurs because of our response to that overwhelming and unconditional love.

St Paul tries to put into words of practical instruction what life could be like if we treated one another like God treats us and it is good, it's also hard, but it is good. But what about the people who don't do it, you might ask, how does the love led society work if everyone isn't loving us back. Well that's the thing about unconditional love, it is personally risky, it involves giving when we suspect or even know for sure that we will receive nothing in return. If we go into encounters expecting a response from others we are setting ourselves up for disappointments, but when we truly love unconditionally, when we see love as something we

do for us and our relationship with God rather than for other people, when they do respond we will appreciate it with joyful thanksgiving.

Jesus went to his home synagogue, he spoke publicly about his ministry, he knew he would never be accepted there in the same way as he had been in his surrounding country, but out of his love for those people and that community, he took the gospel to them. They did not receive it that day, in fact they tried to chuck him off a cliff, so it's fair to say they were very far from understanding the love of God that day, but they were not ignored. Jesus didn't say to himself, they'll never want to hear me so I won't bother going to them. Jesus loved with no expectation of a response and that is the example he has set for us.

Our community often looks pretty good when we use St Paul's description of love as a benchmark. This church family, this parish community should not be a place that harbours deep seated grudges and animosity. Do we have times of upset where someone mis-speaks or is misunderstood, of course, do we argue with one another, sometimes. Do we let it get in the way of our ability to play our unique role in the body of Christ, let us hope not. Do we aspire to move closer and closer to this model of community based on love, let us hope so.

The reality of the Christian life is that it is a journey that we continue to make whatever our age or stage of faith. Be suspicious of anyone who offers you a quick fix to understand the mind of God, it is by its very nature unknowable by us, yet the language and law of love is surely the closest we have to an easy to follow rulebook. In every circumstance, love. When we are wronged, return the wrongdoing with love, when we are loved, return with love, when we met someone new, love them, when we spend our time with people for many years, keep loving them. Whatever the circumstance, problem or decision, find the way forward that shows the most love, for then, truly will we glimpse the kingdom of God amongst us.