

03 February 2019 EPIPHANY 4

Sermon delivered by the Revd Stephen Monsiegnur

Jesus has just read from the prophetic scripture of Isaiah. At first he is well received by those present, but as he goes on this reaction changes to one of anger and rejection.

What is going on?

What did Jesus do to elicit such an abrupt and negative change in the tone of the audience?

What does it say to us?

As some will know I did not always identify as an Anglican but rather I was firm in my self-awareness as a Roman Catholic. In fact even after meeting and marrying Ursula who was Anglican, I was convinced that while nice well-meaning people, they did not quite understand the requirements for a relationship with God.

Of course the Roman Catholic Church was the true church of God, or so I thought, from the title. The error of course was not with the Anglicans but with me.

Now this is not a bash the Catholic sermon, rather I hope it displays the importance of being open to enquiry, open to questioning what and why we believe, and importantly open to the call of Jesus even if we are unsure of the future.

I was raised in the Roman Catholic tradition, my family heritage both maternal and paternal was deeply Roman Catholic. Being Roman Catholic was simply the way it was.

This was where the people in that synagogue listening to Jesus were that day. They were God's chosen people, devout, faithful Jews. They lived their lives adhering to the Law, the culture and all that was expected of them. Judaism was simply the way it was.

Now remember life for the Jewish nation had not been easy. Throughout most of their history they had been occupied by one enemy or another. During Jesus time they were occupied by Rome. But this time was different, following the actions of Judas Maccabees in 166 BC which had delivered them from the oppression of Syrian king Antiochus IV, the Jews began to feel that the time of arrival for the promised messiah was nearing, there was a vibe of messianic expectation in the air. This messiah the Jews believed would of course crush the enemies of Judaism. This messiah would of course be familiar with and adherent to the Law upon which the sense of what it was to be both a Jew and a special person to God hung. Then along comes Jesus.

Most know him personally as the son of Joseph and Mary, they had watch him grow up into a sociable, bright young man; Jesus being a devout Jew reads the scripture as is his right, and after reading the prophetic scripture of Isaiah he delivers possibly the shortest but most significant sermon in human history by declaring that, *"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."* (Lk 4:16-21)

Luke tells us the news was received well. Likely because Jesus had tapped into the emotion of the people.

I suspect however given the tone of comments, that there were some who were less than convinced, they likely wanted evidence, so Jesus not being one for half-truths went on to further to explain the fulfilment of this prophecy in Isaiah:

"I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian." (Lk 4:25-27)

Jesus is referring to a time, about 800 to 900 years earlier to a divided kingdom of Judah and Israel, a time where the spiritual life of the Jewish nation was at its lowest ebb; And it was during that time that God refused to intervene in the lives of the Jews but sovereignly intervened in the lives of two Gentiles. This was a time in which God raised up two important prophets Elijah and Elisha his successor.

What Jesus was saying now was too much; Jesus was attacking one of the most important tenets of Judaism – that of the Jews being a special people to God.

Jesus actually in contrast is heralding a new age where Jew and Gentile were going to have equal access to being special to God.

The God presumed by the Jews to be 'their God was in fact to show the self as god of and for all.

Now how many of us today here in this church have a little sense of being special before God? After all we attend church, we read scripture and pray, kneel and stand at the right times, even attempt to sing in the right key, you know we do all the right things. We obey the Law of scripture.

We are good Christians.

How many of us today here in this church might be a little like those in the synagogue hearing Jesus?

My becoming Anglican was not initially by my choice. I have been known to say it happened by accident; But with hindsight I know it happened because it was what God needed to happen.

While hindsight is like a 10th birthday present that is received when you turn twenty. A lovely thought, great toy but what fun I could have had, it is always a gift you can learn from. I look back and see Gods hand at work.

The people listening to Jesus in the synagogue were as Jesus was, committed Jews, just as I was a committed Roman Catholic. Jesus was not saying that they were unworthy or bad, he was saying; You are so focussed on what you think you need to do and on how you think you need to behave, that you fail to recognise what God truly wants of you.

Those Jews and Gentiles who listened and heard what Jesus was saying are our Christian ancestors, they did not abandon the Law but rather applied it more correctly in the world.

Jesus mission was not to himself but to others. If we as Christians, as followers of Jesus are to be true to his mission then we must also mission not to ourselves but to others. We must do so without expectation of reward of any sort. We must do it for the same reason Jesus does – unconditional, eternal love. The love that made it possible for God to give His only begotten Son as a price for a new covenant with humanity.

When asked which commandment in the law is the greatest? Jesus makes it very clear;

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment.

And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Mt 22: 38-40)

I say again, Jesus mission was not to himself but to others. It was and through us, must still be a mission of love. Love known by the Greeks as ‘Agape’,

- love that transcends human logic;
- love that Jesus had for us as his ministry led him to Calvary;
- love that goes to the heart of the Gospels.

Jesus is not looking for a meeting of KPI’s¹ but at attitude.

He is not looking at the deeds themselves but the motivation behind them.

Jesus is not interested in sterile religion – in keeping the rules - but rather in growing a living relationship.

Today we need to ask just how our relationship with Jesus is.

Are we too focussed on performance and tradition?

Or

Is agape – love the force that directs everything?

How would you describe your drive?

AMEN