

Sunday 14 Year B Holy Redeemer July 4th 2021 11AM

Not many people realise this, but for many hundreds of years before the coming of Christ there were hardly any Jews in Galilee. In the 8th C BC Isaiah had called it *Galilee of the nations* – Galilee of the foreigners in other words

Round 100 BC or so they started to move back and reclaim this territory as their own and the people of Nazareth saw themselves as being on the front line of the reconquest. Not totally unlike modern Israeli settlers in designated Palestinian territories. We can only guess what Nathaniel means when he says: *Nazareth, what good could come from that place* but when people find themselves in the Nazarenes position it can make them hard and unyielding in a very particular way. So maybe that's what Nathanael means.

Whatever the reason it appears that they are un-teachable. And part of the reason is that they claim to know Jesus.

What's the best thing about living in a village – everyone knows you, you're part of a community.

What's the worst thing about living in a village – everyone knows you! They have you pigeon-holed.

There is much much more to Jesus than they know or understand, but they will only allow him to be “the carpenter”.

The JB translates *and they would not accept him*. That's rather weak. The RSV has *and they took offence at him*, the Greek actually says *they were scandalized by him*. They basically say “Who does he think he is? What makes him think he can preach to us?”

St Luke gives us an account of this incident, but a much fuller account. Jesus is in the synagogue there and has just read from Isaiah's jubilee proclamation:

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, (Isa 61:1-2 RSV)

He leaves out a crucial half verse:

and the day of vengeance of our God;

There was a strong belief around at the time that Melchizedek would be the one to come back and inaugurate the Final Jubilee year, when God would at last start to put things right.

By saying:

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (4:21)

Jesus is very unequivocally proclaiming to be Melchizedek.

But the people also believed that Melchizedek would bring reward for God's people and punishment for the gentiles. – Vengeance. And that's the very verse Jesus leaves out. What Luke tells us is probably not all that happened but the people were not pleased with him. They thought

the God of Israel was as parochial and narrow minded and nationalistic as they were and Jesus suggests the opposite. They seem to have a strong faith – but what they believe in is the Jewish national cause, not the full truth of the God of Israel. You sometimes meet Catholics, especially from strongly Catholic countries but we used to get it in my part of Liverpool, who proudly proclaim their Catholicism, but don't go to Mass and their Catholicism seems to consist mainly in despising those who aren't Catholics. It's been described as tribal Catholicism. We have something like that here in Nazareth.

And so Jesus reminds them with two examples that the God of Israel isn't nearly as nationalistic, chauvinistic and xenophobic as they are. And this comes not from some woolly liberalism but from the Jewish Scriptures themselves.

"Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country. ²⁵ But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when there came a great famine over all the land; ²⁶ and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. ²⁷ And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath.

(Luke 4:24-28 RSV)

Let me try to give a relatively modern parable to what Jesus does here. Some years ago, Radio 4 did a programme about the Queen's title 'Defender of the Faith'. They asked the question should this be retained in such a diverse Britain. Among those interviewed were two Protestant pastors from Northern Ireland who were also leaders of the Orange Lodge. Predictable they said it should be kept and how it was very important in NI that the Queen was the defender of their Protestant faith. The interviewer asked them did they know that the title was originally given by the Pope to Henry VIII as defender of the Catholic Faith? Clearly, they didn't, they were utterly taken aback

When you hear something like that, you either change or you reject the messenger; you reject the parts of your own tradition that you don't like.

What at first sight looks like a strong Jewish faith turns out to be just a sort of crude tribalism.

So the villagers of Nazareth had their own reasons for rejecting Jesus.

and he could work no miracle there, except that he cured a few sick people by laying his hands on them. ⁶ He was amazed at their lack of faith. (Mar 6:5-6 NJB)

Lack of faith seems to mean that they were in no way open to being surprised by him. They wouldn't allow anything that they could not control and manage themselves.

One of the reasons Henry VIII had St. Thomas More killed was that he couldn't control him, and Thomas would not entertain the idea that a king could control the Church. Henry could not bear the idea that he was the supreme authority in the land but there were people who gave allegiance to a higher authority still.

I was on St. Peter's square when Benedict was elected. With modern technology text messages and e mails were frantically going back and forth. The number of people who in various ways were sure that they knew better than Joseph Ratzinger was astounding. We can all very easily fall into the trap the Nazarenes fell into.

Are we living our Christian lives like that, or are we truly open to Jesus in all his fullness, with all his surprises?