

Year C Epiphany 4

Jeremiah 1:4-10

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Luke 4:21-20

I used to live in a parish that had several well-known people living in it. I didn't live anywhere very special, but it was close to London whilst also being a rural part of Hertfordshire. The parish had quite a few big houses on the edge of the villages or out in the surrounding countryside. Can you imagine how excited I was, especially as I was an 11 year old Arsenal supporter, when Bob Wilson, the Arsenal goalkeeper from the 1971 double-winning side came to live in the parish? I was reminded of my sense of excitement and pride when I read the gospel reading. I will try and explain why.

We have read that Jesus, the local boy who had gone away for a time, was now back in his hometown. He came to the synagogue and was invited to read the scripture and speak. Jesus wowed the attendees in the synagogue, Luke tells us that they "were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth" (v22). The Greek word (*thaumazō*) translated as 'amazed' in the NRSV means to wonder at, or to marvel at. That's a pretty clear description of how the hearers responded to Jesus' words.

The people in the synagogue are clearly impressed with Jesus, and I guess are getting the feeling that their sleepy unremarkable rural town in the hill country is about to gain a great reputation. They had known this lad since he was a wee boy. That would have made them feel good, and they may have started imagining what their future maybe like having a famous young man, one of their own, as God's chosen Messiah.

Were they listening to Jesus and were they becoming proud of their town of Nazareth? Nazareth, hometown of the Messiah. You could sense them wanting to write that on a big sign to put on the road on the way into town that everyone would see. I bit more impressive than saying 'Welcome to Penicuik, twinned with...'

So what happened to change their happy reflections? What did Jesus say that, in an instant, changed the mood of the hearers from amazement and wonder to one of being 'filled with rage' (v 29)?

I wonder if Jesus sensed that the hearers were less concerned with his message, the transformation he was calling for, and more focussed on the fact that the local boy had made good and so the people were starting to think about what benefits they may gain from this situation? I wonder how many heard Jesus, took in what he said, understood the 'Messiah' bit but then focussed on the wrong thing?

So, to disrupt their wrong-thinking, Jesus said some provocative things.

He mentions Elijah and Elisha. The well-known stories from the Hebrew Scriptures did not need to be spelled out to Jesus's listeners. Both Elijah and Elisha carry out the work of God and bring about benefits for non-Jewish people. Elijah helped a widow in Sidon, not the Jews suffering from the famine. Elisha healed Naamen the Syrian of his leprosy, in preference to the many Jewish lepers.

Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish scholar who studies Christian texts, says¹ that the people in the synagogue were not angry with Jesus because he used examples of the prophets' actions for the benefit of gentiles. This has been employed by several commentators as an explanation for the sudden change in the mood of the synagogue.

However, Amy-Jill Levine says the people in the synagogue were angry with Jesus because the examples showed that the people of Nazareth could not make any preferential claims on Jesus and would not be able to contain him to ensure Jesus' good works benefitted their community. It was as if they thought they had this wonderful home-grown talent that would solve all of their woes and travails and forever be their resident prophet, only to be told by Jesus, through the examples he gave, that his ministry was much wider than all of their immediate assumptions and expectations and that he would not focus on his home turf.

In v28 we read that 'all in the synagogue were filled with rage'. The root of the Greek word used for 'rage', *Thumos* used by Luke suggests a very immediate and emotional burst of anger or wrath, a hot and fiery but short-live passionate response to his wordsⁱⁱ.

Jesus really did hit a sore point, didn't he?

The peoples' assumptions led them to think of Jesus as their property, their own 'pet' Messiah. Jesus had to disabuse them of this, one because his ministry was always going to be for the whole nation and beyond to other nations, and because in focussing on that one issue, the people had not heard the deep truth of his message about 'today' being important, 'today' being when God is active through us to bring good news and the year of the Lord's favour.

There is something so utterly truthful about the human condition in this story. How often do we listen to something, start to formulate a dream or selfish wish based on what we are hearing, and in the process completely miss what eternal truth is in the message, a truth we should have been listening for? It is the same with many conversations; we listen to respond and defend a position, not to listen and understand. No wonder so much of our communication goes awry. No wonder so much communication can lead to misunderstanding and conflict. We seldom listen to understand. We

seldom try and stop our mind from racing ahead and forming conclusions and ideas when the other person is still mid-sentence. I know I have been guilty of that. The pressure to complete something and move on to the next bit of work, sometimes the self-imposed pressure to think ahead, make assumptions and formulate a response without really listening to everything that a person is saying. Nearly always that pressure is self-inflicted, and often when we make assumptions, when we hear but don't really listen, we may respond rapidly, but how often have we missed the point, how often have we gone off on the wrong tack. It would have been better to have focussed and listened, to explore our response and acknowledge any emotions and feelings arising, and intentionally decide how best to respond. Quite often it may be better to pause, to think, before responding.

When we hear things, it may be appropriate to be angry or discomfited; in fact often I wonder why people are not more angry and discomfited when they hear of dishonest, immoral, corrupt things. That sort of righteous anger should lead us to make a decision to do something about it. It may be prayer, it may be a letter to your MSP or MP or to a newspaper or a call to a radio station, or it could be to take some other practical action.

However, sometimes when we hear things and we are discomfited and angry, it may be because it challenges us about our personal presuppositions and biases, challenges us about our own relative place of privilege and our expectations. In those situations we should not do what the people in the synagogue in Nazareth did, and have our own 'Thumos' moment, our own burst of emotional anger that can cause deep hurt and can be a barrier to reflecting and learning. In those situations we need to sit with our discomfort and listen. Listen and seek to understand. When we have a better understanding we can respond in a much more constructive way than rushing at the speaker and trying to throw him off a hillside.

I like to think of this being the equivalent of hitting the pause button on my DVD player. As we pause, we stop from making a reactive response. For many people, especially those who are used to forms of meditation, it is a long slow inbreath that creates the time to acknowledge the feeling and thoughts and allows the space to reach a grounded equanimity from which to listen and respond from a place of God's peace.

In our world we often believe we should not be discomforted and should not inhabit any time or space of discomfort. That is a pity, because such a state of discomfort can be where we learn, where we reflect, where we analyse and resolve to change or to be able to see a situation from another person's point of view.

This gospel reading shows what an opportunity for growth and development the people of Nazareth missed out on. Their assumptions and self-centred approach led them to rapidly react to the words of Jesus. If only they had actually listened, if only they had not come filled with presuppositions about God and the Messiah.

I wonder what your 'if only' moments are like, and how you may be transformed by pausing, listening, exploring, understanding....
I wonder how Jesus felt as he slipped through the hot-headed crowd; from what we know of him I am sure he would have been saddened at the opportunity, and full of compassion for them, but accepted that they were not ready to receive him and be transformed.

Jesus,
when our assumptions
are challenged
or our narratives overturned
help us to stay with the discomfort
and dig deeper
in search of better understandings.

When our emotions
are running high,
help us to breathe
and may that breath
make a space
in which we can listen –
even if we don't agree.
Amen.

ⁱ Amy-Jill Levine: *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, Oxford University Press, 2017. Page 107

ⁱⁱ W E Vine: *Expository Dictionary of the New Testament*, Oliphant, 1978.