

Today's gospel reading comes from chapter 4 of Luke's gospel. The first two chapters of Luke's gospel is the Christmas story, the story of Christ's birth that is so familiar to us. Chapter 3 tells of John the Baptist and, finishes with Jesus being baptized by John in the Jordan.

Chapter 4 begins with the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness and today's reading pick up right after the , having been unable to tempt Jesus with worldly or heavenly powers, takes his leave. After 40 days in the wilderness being tempted by the devil and with no food, drink or shower I for one would have headed home for a bath and a good meal but the gospel leaves that part out and instead picks up with today's passage saying that "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country . He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone."

Today's gospel tells how Jesus unrolled the scroll from the prophet Isaiah and proclaimed that he had come to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free.

We're then told that Jesus sits back down and tells the people that today, this scripture has been fulfilled.

With apologies to Gillian or whoever is preaching next week, I just can't let the story end there. For the story isn't finished. As you'll hear in next Sunday's gospel it's what happens next that is really interesting. At first the people are very impressed with how well Jesus has spoken and they are very proud of their hometown hero, of Joseph's son. But then it all starts to go bad.

Jesus, anticipating that it wasn't going to be long before the hometown crowd started asking special favors, decides to set the record straight from the outset. He reminds them of Elijah, the prophet who lived in Israel at a time when there was a three and a half year famine. But God sent Elijah to help not the widows of Israel but only to one widow in Sidon. Similarly, Jesus reminds them that God sent the prophet Elisha not to heal the lepers of Israel but to heal Naaman the Syrian. The message is clear. He's not here for the home crowd. He's here for foreigners and outcasts.

Needless to say, the people of Nazareth are not pleased. What's the point of having a hometown hero if he's not going to do the hometown a few favors? If he's not going to feed their hungry, cure their sick. Moreover, what is the

point of waiting expectantly for a Messiah, if, when the Messiah finally comes, the first thing he does is announce he has really come for other people. For the poor, the captives, and the oppressed. For foreigners.

The people of Nazareth are so enraged, so disappointed, so insulted, that they drive Jesus out of town and do their best to hurl him off a cliff.

The hard message that the people of Nazareth didn't want to hear was that, in many ways, the good news is not for them. It's for the blind, the oppressed, the captives.

This is, in fact, the message we get over and over again in the gospels. The good news is that the first shall be last, the rich shall be turned away empty,

Christ begins his public ministry by unrolling the scroll of Isaiah and saying that he has come to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free.

For most of us here today that is good news not so much for us but for other people. I'd dare to say that most of us here this morning are not poor, are not captive, are not oppressed.

So how do we respond to the good news?

I know I'm jumping around in my biblical texts today but do you know the parable of the laborers in the vineyard? The one so many of us hate when all the laborers get paid the same wage, no matter if they worked the whole day or just the last hour. When the ones who worked the whole day complain the owner says, 'or are you envious because I am generous" Or are you envious or are you generous.

In a way, this is one of the central questions of the gospel, one of the central questions of the Christian life. Are we envious because God is generous? Are we willing to love, follow and serve a generous God, but a God whose generosity may not always be specifically directed at us. Are we willing to labor away, knowing that those who work only an hour will get paid the same as us. Are we willing to be one of the 99 sheep who are left to fend for ourselves while God goes looking for the one who is lost? Are we willing to give up being first and be last?

For if we are going to follow Christ, if we are going to become servants of Christ, we are going to have to be so willing. Perhaps the first message of the gospel is that it's not all about you. The first and great commandment is to love the lord our god with all our hearts and soul and mind and strength and the second is like unto it, to love our neighbor as ourself. See, now all about us. It's about you doing Christ's work of loving and serving other people. It's about being willing to be one of the 99, one of the last, one of the ones who isn't miraculously cured, who doesn't get all the attention.

It's about trusting, really trusting, that it is in giving up our own lives that we find them.

As Christ told us, For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.

I know that this parish has recently done some visioning work and that there is renewed energy to focus both on the rich worship life you enjoy together but also on outreach to the wider community. Bless you in this work. My advice to you as you do this work is don't ever make the mistake of getting too focused on yourselves. Allow for the fact that you might not be God's number one priority. That God might be more concerned with the poor, the blind and the lame. Yes, church attendance is dwindling and the church as

institution is facing some very real challenges, but us getting our knickers in a know about that isn't going to help anyone.

Churches that are focused on their own decline, decline. Churches that are focused on love of God and love of neighbor. Churches that risk losing their life in order to find it, churches that get out of their comfort zones and go out into the world to meet Christ there, those are the churches that grow. That grow in love, faith and understanding.