Homily – 4th Sunday in Ord. Time (C)

*Jer. 1: 4-5, 17-19; 1 Cor. 12: 31 – 13: 13 & Luke 4: 21-30*

You will probably remember that, in last week’s Gospel, we heard Luke’s account of the beginning of Jesus’ preaching in his home synagogue at Nazareth. He takes the scroll of Isaiah, and reads of the coming Messiah – the prophecy of new sight for the blind, of good news preached to the poor, of liberation for captives, the proclamation of the Lord’s year of favour. And the last sentence of last week’s Gospel is the first sentence of today’s passage – showing the people’s admiration for his words, their astonishment at his claim that “today, even as you listen, this prophecy is being fulfilled”. It is a common theme in Luke – each miracle, each teaching provokes wonder and thanksgiving in the crowds who see and hear Jesus at work.

Yet, within a sentence, everything changes. We do not know who the “they” are who seem to doubt that what is happening can be true, yet someone puts the awkward question: *Isn’t this just the carpenter’s son? Who does he think he is?* Jesus’ response is calm, but pointed. He refers back to recent events at Capernaum – although, in fact, Luke never makes clear what those were – and to their own expectations, but then makes that telling comment: *No prophet is ever accepted in his own country*, backing up his statement with two well-known examples from the Old Testament prophets, Elijah and Elisha. And this is sufficient to enrage his hearers – to so enrage them, indeed, that they try to kill him. It is all very strange, seemingly a complete over-reaction on the part of the people of Nazareth. It is almost as if Luke is summarising the whole of the Gospel to come in this one brief episode – the initial response of wonder and joy at Jesus’ preaching and miracles, and then the growing rejection and violence he faces as he reveals the “unexpected” nature of the Kingdom, a violence and rejection that – as we know – will one day lead to the Cross.

Yet Jesus is pointing to a reality in human nature of which we are all well aware. The people of Nazareth *think* they know Jesus – after all, they know his family, they have watched him grow up, they have possibly even bought their furniture from him. They *think* they know him. But then he surprises them – the reports of the miracles, the gracious words of his preaching, all seem beyond the realms of possibility, they don’t fit with what they think they know, and so they reject the evidence of their own eyes and ears. Rather than *learning* from these new and unexpected events, rather than staying open to the possibilities they offer, they close their hearts and their minds, rejecting the new because it is so much easier to live with the old, so much less threatening to stay comfortable with our preconceived ideas.

We can all fall into this trap – sometimes in trivialities, sometimes in more weighty matters. I was very surprised when – just before Christmas – our then Head Chef told me she was leaving the Hall. I was initially very worried that we had made her unhappy, or were asking too much of her – and I was absolutely astonished when she told me that it was none of those things, indeed almost the opposite, but that she felt she needed more time to work on her Physics degree! It had never even crossed my mind that this brilliant cook would also be a budding scientist – and I realised I had thrown away so much opportunity for conversation and exchange of ideas, simply because I thought I already knew all there was to know about her. I felt stupid. It may be a foolish example, but we all do this with each other every day. We see someone’s haircut or clothes, we hear their accent, we see the colour of their skin – and we rush to judgment and think we know them. We *think* we know, so we close down the possibility of surprise. We “pigeonhole” people so quickly that we never really encounter them as they are. We *think* we know, so we never truly meet each unique individual in the mystery and wonder of their existence. And that is our loss, just as it was for the people of Nazareth. Despite his proximity to them, they never truly *met* Jesus, for they thought they already knew who he was.

Last term, we started a new discussion group in the Hall. Called “Listening Together”, we hope that it will eventually grow into a forum for the discussion of faith and belief open to all – of any faith or of none. But we were very aware from the outset that before any dialogue would be possible, we first had to learn how to listen. Indeed, the very name of the group – *Listening Together* – comes from the beginning and the end of the Rule of St Benedict. The Rule’s first word is “Listen”, and the closing prayer of c.72 says: “And may He bring us all *together* to everlasting life”. We have met twice now, and two things have become very apparent. Firstly, real listening, real attentiveness to the other and their experience, is hard work and tiring, but an immense privilege. Secondly, to listen or to speak in such a group can make us very vulnerable, and requires a deep trust and a deep respect for the other, an openness to their words and their experience. The last thing it needs is rushing to judgment.

Perhaps that is what makes hearing those familiar words of St Paul this morning so special. In some ways, we might see a parallel between that great “hymn of love” and true listening – indeed, I might go as far as to say that the first skill any lover must learn *is* such listening – a listening that is patient and kind, a listening which is never rude or selfish, a listening which is merciful and delights in the truth of the beloved. Both true listening and true loving make us vulnerable, both are risky, both take us “beyond the known” into the mystery of the other as they *are*, not as we imagine them to be.

Today’s Opening Prayer asked that we might honour the Lord with all our mind and love others in sincerity of heart. It is, of course, a meditation on that great Gospel precept of Jesus: *You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself* (Mt. 22:37ff). That is the measure of our discipleship as Christians. And if we are to fulfil that commandment, the greatest of the New Law, then our discipleship of love must truly be a discipleship of listening – listening to the Lord in our prayer and our worship, listening to our neighbours in all their joys and their needs. And as we listen in love, we need not fear the vulnerability that brings, the vulnerability of the Cross the Lord asks us to carry each day, for we know He has carried it before us. In those words of Jeremiah which we have just heard, we know that the Lord is with us to deliver us. All we really need fear is that – like the people of Nazareth – we might close the ear of our heart, and so drive Christ from our midst. That is all we need fear. May it never be so. Amen.

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