

How could something that started out so good quickly end so bad? This is the question I found myself asking after reading today’s Gospel passage. Last Sunday as we listened to the first part of chapter 4 of Luke’s Gospel where Jesus begins his public ministry in his hometown synagogue of Nazareth on the Sabbath and, called upon by the religious elders to do the reading, applies the prophet Isaiah’s vision of the arrival of the promised messianic age to himself, the initial reaction of those assembled was “amazement” at his words and “all spoke highly of him.” Today, however, the same scene suddenly turns ugly, so ugly in fact that it ends in Jesus being forcibly evicted from the synagogue, taken to the edge of the cliff on which the town was built, and nearly hurled over its edge which would have been followed by the people hurling boulders on his, hopefully, broken body and killing him for blasphemy. How could this have happened? What message is there here for us today?

The key lies in the first word Jesus uttered after he finished reading from Isaiah and sitting down begins his teaching—“Today.” “Today” in the scriptures is more than a designation of chronological time. “Today” is a proclamation of God’s in-breaking presence in the world in the present moment. What so shocked and angered the people gathered in the synagogue was Jesus’ claim that Isaiah’s vision was now present and fulfilled in human flesh and blood in him! Jesus was inviting and challenging his hearers to faith in him! And while the hearers no doubt would readily, or not so readily depending upon their particular understanding (we’d say “spin”) on Isaiah’s words and their own piety, apply those words to the physically poor, blind, oppressed and captive (and even here there would be disagreement as to who was designated and who would be “worthy” of such divine grace) Jesus is challenging his hearers to look into their own hearts. Jesus is challenging his hearers to recognize their own poverty, blindness, and captivity through their narrowness (but yet, comfortable) religious belief and practice. Jesus was challenging them to a broader vision, to a universal (catholic in the true sense of that word) love and action. And all of this, Jesus asserts, is present in him “today”

and this life can be theirs also “today” if they but open their hearts, minds, and life to him.

This scene still invites and challenges us “today.” As I look into my own heart, and look and reflect on the wider experience of the church, locally, nationally, and in the wider world, while much is good and praiseworthy, yet I also experience at times in myself and in the church some little, or more than little, of the same resistance and obstinacy that God predicted Jeremiah in his vocation as a prophet in the first reading would, and did, encounter and Jesus in Gospel experienced. Today, “Orthodoxy” narrowly defined and applied by individuals and groups within the church has become the standard by which other individuals and groups in, and outside, of the church are judged. Often I find myself asking: “Could Jesus go missing here?” The Jesus of St. Luke’s Gospel stretches limits, challenges his readers to broaden their horizons, risk embracing the “outsider”. Are we up to the challenge?

Today’s second reading contains St. Paul’s popularly labeled “Hymn to Love” a favorite of couples on their wedding day. However, Paul did not have romantic love in mind when he penned it. Paul was writing to a Corinthian church that was deeply and bitterly divided into factions (not unlike our own situation today) where individuals and groups claimed “orthodoxy” because of their following of a particular “apostle” preaching and teaching. St. Paul challenges his hearers, and us, to an expansive love of listening and acting in daily acts of patience, humility, forbearance, forgiveness and in the doing, encounter the person and truth of Jesus “today.”

It has been said that for many people your life and mine will be the only Bible, the only Church community, they will see, hear, and experience. What image, what word, what person of Jesus does each of our lives proclaim? Pope Paul VI in his encyclical on evangelization in 1975 said that what the world needs today is “witnesses”. And it is this invitation to be witnesses through personal conversion and faith that Jesus calls us “today.”