**Sermon Epiphany 4C**

1 Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-30

30th January 2022

Few things are certain in life we all know that, we have experienced it ourselves many times.

How often do we find ourselves overtaken by events? One thing in my life was fairly certain though, when I went off to theological college to train for ministry my first parish would not be here, it would not be Dunedin. Nothing on my part against the Edinburgh of the South or you lovely people, it’s just that I had candidated from Dunedin, I was a known quantity, I had a history. Conventional wisdom is that it is difficult to go in to your former home parish as presbyter. Now I had only been a part of that community for a few years but some people are less nomadic than me and when I did come back there were many familiar faces

Imagine someone growing up in a parish, being part of it from childhood onwards maybe into his or her mid thirties. How could that person after a stint at theological college go back to that community and face the people who knew her as a small child, or the person who was his first love, all those people who remember the newly minted minister as a gawky and occasionally obnoxious adolescent?

Just suppose though I had been stationed in Dunedin as my first and not my third appointment. Just how badly could it have gone? It may have been a struggle but somehow I don’t think it would have gone so catastrophically badly that I would have been horsewhipped in the Octagon or thrown off the cliffs at Lawyer’s Head.

Yes some services fail to inspire, some sermons fall flat. But if I ever go home on a Sunday morning feeling like a failure well, I am in good company. After all company doesn’t get better than Jesus.

Today’s gospel has Jesus back home, guest preacher in the synagogue he had grown up in. The story is told over two weeks and last week’s gospel told us that Jesus had read from the prophet Isaiah; a text which tells of the spirit being upon an anointed person, literally on a messiah, who is empowered to proclaim *good news to the poor … freedom for the prisoners … sight for the blind*.

Last week’s reading closed with what is the very model of a sermon; short, concise and to the point. *Today this reading is fulfilled in your hearing*.

At first they were impressed, all spoke well of him. And then someone said *isn’t this Joseph’s son*? The spell was broken, for a moment the congregation were moved by the power of the text and the affirmation that this was coming to be and then they remembered. They remembered the carpenter’s son, the chippie’s kid. Obviousy he should have never left his workshop because he was now, in their estimation anyway, a bit of a nutter. Who was he to wrap himself up in the language and imagery of a messiah?

Noticing the change Jesus replies by comparing himself to Elijah and Elisha, who though there was much need in Israel acted in ways which restored life and health to Gentiles. This was too much, the congregation because a mob – and at this point I am keeping an eye on the door just in case – and ran him out of town. Indeed they wanted to throw him off a cliff but somehow he slipped away.

There are a host of things I could say about this story, the first being that less than 10% of Jewish men at that time were literate and would this carpenter’s son really be one of the favoured few? Most Jews memorised the scriptures in the way devout Muslims memorise the Koran. I could talk about how offending religious sensibilities can lead to murderous violence - we see that often enough. But what I want to pick up on is the overlooking, the rejection of the familiar, the contemptuous refusal to engage with someone we think has no right to speak.

Clearly the passage Jesus cited from Isaiah spoke to a deep longing, a deep need but that this longing and need might be met in Jesus, who they all knew so well, that was just delusional, mad!

This speaks to something I think is part of the human condition, our tendency not to see what is right in front of us and to look out there, or up there for meaning, hope, salvation.

In a part of my life which now seems like another lifetime I spent several years in a monastic community; in my novitiate – the initial period of formation – I was told an ancient piece of monastic wisdom. *Stay in your cell, it will teach you everything*.

Now that sounds a bit grim, a cell to us is a grim and bare room in a police station or a prison. A monastic cell is part bedroom, part chapel, part study, part workshop. Here much of the daily life of a monk is lived out. The meaning of the saying is that if you cannot find meaning, God, enlightenment in mindful attentiveness to the very ordinariness of life then no journey however long, no spiritual practice however rigorous and no teacher however respected will be of any help to you.

Life’s very ordinariness is so often seen as confining us when instead it is the place of enlightenment and liberation.

Moving away from questions of where we find spiritual meaning I want to ask if we too ignore the prophets in our own land, in our own community? Do we hear and heed the voices, difficult and challenging voices perhaps, which call us to change, to live differently, to do something?

Sometimes those voices can make us angry, if not murderous I hope. When at theological college our academic year would begin with a couple of days up in Waitangi for the Waitangi Day celebrations. Quite apart from the rituals of state, the dawn service, the visiting dignitaries, the twenty one gun salute from a frigate out in the bay there were a host of Maori speakers from a range of groups; some of whom said things which to my cossetted middle class *pakeha* ears were nonsensical or inflammatory. Dispossession and starvation were talked about as present day realities, all my instincts were to say something abrupt, possibly in robust Anglo Saxon, and then say *get over it*.

But then I slept on it, I played it over again and again in my mind and came to see beyond the shock, the offence even, to the truth of it. To the lingering dispossession, to the sustained economic disadvantage.

Likewise many of us once dismissed Green ideas and policies as alarmist, fringe, barmy even. Yet in time the reality of their concern has become more and more apparent to us in the face of climate change and environmental degradation and what was once fringe is now mainstream.

So who are the disconcerting voices, the irritating voices we would dismiss, yet who might have a truth to tell we really need to here? It is not for me to answer that for you, working this out is a task we are all called to both as individuals and as a society. The task of discernment is far from easy but here’s a clue, a hint, a method of discernment; ask, where is the love?

Before our Gospel we heard Paul’s love poetry, his praise of love. One of the most familiar, beloved texts. Here is just a small part of it; *Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful*.

Some of those disconcerting voices may seem precisely that, irritable and resentful. But I suspect that is as much about our own threatened sense of privilege as it is about their anger. It is always worth asking what is beyond the rhetoric, what is the subtext to the short soundbites, the slogans on placards. Is it about simply replacing one injustice with another, advantaging one group over the others or does it speak to a vision for all of us? Does it offer the possibility of a stronger, more just, more equal community? Does it nurture the justice and mutuality that we Christians claim to be part of that vision of human possibility we call the Kingdom of God?

May we have ears to hear, eyes to see, wisdom to discern, courage to love Amen