

LIPHOOK METHODIST CHURCH
SUNDAY 31 JANUARY 2016, 10am
EPIPHANY 4(C)

Readings: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:20-30

[slide 1] You may have noticed that the reading followed straight on from the one we have 2 weeks ago at Hazel and Thomas's baptism. That one contained our verse for the year: Luke 4:18.

Do we remember the verse yet?

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news ..."

So the part we've just heard is from the same occasion. This is a good opportunity to see if we can spot the connections for us that might be implications of the verse for the year. **[slide 2]**

- We can look at what's going on in the Nazareth synagogue.
- We can look at prophets and why they don't seem to go down well on home territory.
- We can look at Jesus' references to Elijah and Elisha and what that's all about.
- We can look at the slightly odd sounding bit at the end when Jesus avoids being thrown off a cliff.

We can do all that but the key thing is not what happened. It is interesting and important to understand something of what it's about but that's not the main thing either.

The connection we made 2 weeks ago is that if this is about the way Jesus saw himself and his mission we are inheritors of the same mission because we are among his followers now.

So the key things for us is how this connects with the task we have as a church and as Christians today.

So we'll look at all those things and we'll see if we can see connections for us.

Nazareth Synagogue [slide 3]

It's all going well - even after the slightly provocative initial statement that the scripture about the anointed one is fulfilled in their hearing. They're amazed and spoke well of him. Beware, as they say when all speak well of you.

There's a hint of something slightly less than good in the question, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" But it's not the immediate open hostility and offence that Mark and Matthew indicate.

They know him, he's a local lad and it's good to have him home after all they've heard about what he did in Capernaum.

We find that too don't we? If a local person gains some celebrity status or makes a name for themselves we like to see them back home. We think we own them in some way when the person on the telly is one of us.

We might say, "I went to school with his dad" or "I remember when she was in Brownies".

So there's a bit of local pride and a hope for some reflected glory from the local boy made good. But there's another way to interpret the question. We don't hear the tone of voice.

Isn't this Joseph's son? – we know him don't we?

Or Isn't this Joseph's son? – he's got a bit above himself hasn't he? His dad was the carpenter, how come he's teaching in synagogues now?

Being local, being known can cut both ways. Maybe it depends on what you have to say?

Prophets at Home [slide 4]

Not so much prophets at *home* as *prophets* at home.

Prophets tend to have something to say that is a bit pointed for some of their hearers.

Amos had some sharp things to say about how those with power and influence treated the poor

We heard about Jeremiah's call to be a prophet. He was told that whether his message was one of pulling down or building up it would always be against the tide of opinion. He preaches disaster when people feel confident and renewal when they feel that all is lost.

The thing about prophets is that they speak truth to those in power even – and perhaps especially when it is not what they want to hear.

It's the prophets that are uncomfortable to have around. When they're on home territory it's more difficult because we tend to think we own

them and deserve more loyalty. It's just that a prophet always puts truth before loyalty.

The phone rings in the office, you answer and someone asks for your manager who's just across the desk from you. You cover the phone and tell him they want to speak to him. It's someone he's avoiding at the moment so he says, "tell them I'm not here".

Do you tell the person the other end that he's not there?
Or do you explain that it's not convenient?
Or do you give him the phone and say, "You tell him"?

Do we see prophets now? Do we see people who are prepared to go out on a limb and speak truth to power even when it's unpopular?

An historical example might be Winston Churchill in the 1930s when he was persistently sidelined by his own party and applauded by the opposition because he stuck to the truth as he saw it about the rise of Nazi Germany.

On a more contemporary note someone noticed the juxtaposition on the front of the *Daily Mail* [\[click\]](#) on Thursday which needed pointing out in the name of truth. The article about not taking migrant children because it might encourage a new influx is next to a picture of Britain's number one female tennis player who migrated here as a child from Australia.

As Christians and as a church we are called to be prophetic, to speak truth to power even when those in power are "our people". It will be more uncomfortable than when those in power are not "our people".

Jesus said he wouldn't do the miracles in Nazareth that he'd done in Capernaum. He wouldn't be "owned", he wouldn't play the game of

being the local boy made good and perform to order. He maintained his integrity.

That can be hard to do among family, friends and neighbours. Jesus was demonstrating in the hardest place, right at the beginning of his ministry that what he was about was far deeper and more important than family relationships or the community where he grew up.

Elijah and Elisha [slide 5]

Elijah in particular is an example of a prophet who was unpopular and threatened or persecuted for speaking truth to those in power in his own country.

He fled to foreign territory in Zarephath where his presence helped a poor widow who very limited supplies miraculously did not run out all the time the famine lasted.

But Jesus' point in mentioning Elijah and Elisha is not about their prophecy or their unpopularity with those who found their truths hard to handle. Jesus is making the point that these two high profile examples of messengers of God's truth were not confined to the "chosen people". They didn't stay among their own people.

Jesus is pointing out that God's chosen messengers have never been restricted to bringing his words to the Jews.

It's another way of saying he won't be "owned". He's not confined to Nazareth, or Galilee or his own people.

Maybe we need to hear that. It feels uncomfortable to us to be told that we should be more adventurous about taking our message to people and communities we don't know so well. But on the basis of this it's possible

we'll get a better reception among people who are not so much like us, not from the same "tribe", perhaps people we don't so naturally mix with.

Looking at this episode it was those who knew him, knew his family and his background that took him out to throw him off a cliff.

So let's look at that bit.

Cliff-top Drama **[slide 6]**

I can just about understand a mob mentality that takes such offence and reacts so negatively that it turns violent. To us what Jesus said doesn't sound so bad but I can just about see that it might have sounded worse to those who heard him.

What I find odd is that they didn't actually throw him off the cliff. What was that?

Was it that they couldn't find anyone who would actually do it when it came to it?

Was it that Jesus' sheer force of personality and presence over whelmed them and he walked away?

I don't know how you imagine it.

I find it hard to believe that an angry mob would suddenly stop short.

The Mylai massacre in Vietnam is often quoted as an example of how groups of people are capable of much greater evil than any individual among them. The same could be said of the torture treatment of Iraqi prisoners by both British and American troops.

It does remind me of stories about Wesley who often faced an angry mob and seemed to come through unharmed each time. But usually we're told that's because of what he said and the courage he had to face his persecutors rather than try to run.

I think this may be where the first tool for biblical interpretation might help us.

Let's look at the context.

What happens immediately after this episode?

Jesus went to Capernaum and when he gets to Synagogue there he heals a man with a demon.

Almost everything the gospel writers record is there to show something about Jesus. There are a number of things this might show:

That he can heal and do miracles when he's not at home

That those who recognise the authority of his teaching are able to receive his healing ministry

But I think it might also be no accident that Luke records the healing of someone with an evil spirit.

Attempting to throw Jesus off a cliff to destroy him is an act of evil because it is the rejection of the one who brings God's presence; it is an attempt to remove God from the community.

The healing of a man with an evil spirit demonstrates Jesus' power over evil; it shows that evil cannot continue to hold power when Jesus is present.

Maybe that's what happened at the cliff-top. The evil spirit of the mob had no power over the presence of God whose time had not yet come.

In the end he would finally demonstrate who he was and break the power of evil by being taken by a violent mob and put to death. For now it is enough to be able to walk away and see the power of evil kept at bay.

We are to take courage from this. When we hold to God's truth even when it is unpopular to do so, and especially when it is unpopular with our friends and family and the communities where we are known then we demonstrate a power over evil that is hard to understand and hard to summarise but which mysteriously works.

I've just finished reading a biography of Edith Cavell. She was shot by a German firing squad in October 1915 for helping British, French and Belgian soldiers escape from occupied Belgium. She was completely honest about what she had done but she was convicted and possibly given the death sentence because of a statement that was falsified in the translation.

Her death, her integrity and her faith became a beacon of hope and a rallying point for truth during the Great War and may have contributed to the American decision to join the war.

Being a prophet, speaking truth to power may not be comfortable, but no one ever said that following Jesus would be easy. We may not be thrown off a cliff or shot by firing squad but if we hold on to truth and what is right when others are trying to hold on to power it will not be an easy ride.

Amen.