

Opening the Word: A Gospel for all



Simeon said it would come to this, that Jesus would be the cause of the rise and fall of many in Israel, “a sign that will be contradicted” (Lk 2:34). It was prophesied; at the beginning of John’s Gospel, the reader is warned up front of conflict and drama to come. “He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him” (Jn 1:11). That Jesus would be rejected by most is fundamental to the story.

Luke wants his readers to get their heads around this strange feature of the story right from the beginning. Jesus’s public ministry begins in Capernaum, yet Luke wants his readers to begin in Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth. They praised him, praised his “gracious words” (Lk 4:22). But then come doubts, second-guessing, born of familiarity. This is Joseph’s son. Where could he have gotten all this?

January 30 – Fourth
Sunday in Ordinary
Time

Jer 1:4-5, 17-19
Ps 71:1-2, 3-4, 5-6,
15-17
1 Cor 12:31–13:13
Lk 4:21-30

But that’s not what sent Jesus’ listeners into a rage. Rather, what enraged Jesus’ listeners at Nazareth was that he told them the “glad tidings” he had just said were fulfilled in their hearing were also meant for gentiles – for non-Jews, for outsiders. Simeon had, of course, prophesied that Jesus would be “a light for revelation to the Gentiles,” but this was the

first anyone in Nazareth had heard of it (Lk 2:32). And that's what made them so angry, ready to kill – the idea that the Gospel welcomes not just them, but those over there, too.

How the Gospel included gentiles was perhaps the first genuine crisis for the Church. And in a sense, examining the rest of Christian history, one could argue it remains a crisis for the Church, perhaps as a matter of providence. And perhaps it remains a crisis for each of us personally.

Perhaps each of us is like that character, Ruby Turpin, in Flannery O'Connor's wonderful short story "Revelation." Mrs. Turpin looked down upon others, classifying them in her own utterly bigoted way. In her arrogant pride, she was grateful to Jesus for "making everything the way it is," thankful for her place in the social order. It wasn't until she experienced her own humiliation that she was granted a vision similar to Peter's at Joppa (Acts 10). She sees a mystical heavenly procession, at the front of which are all those people she was in the habit of excluding and looking down on – poor people, people of color, the disabled and disturbed, all of them singing, "shouting and clapping and leaping." Only near the end did she recognize people like herself, comported and singing on key. It was heaven, yet organized in exactly the opposite way she had assumed it would be. It was a heaven unlike she imagined, the truth of a Gospel bigger than she thought.

The last were first, the first were last (cf. Mt 20:16). It's funny how clearly Jesus said this but that's it's still so hard for us to accept. The Gospel is for them, too, whoever "them" is for you. What we should ask ourselves, painful though such questions may be, is: Does it anger us that the Gospel includes our enemies and those we dislike? We must ask ourselves this honestly, because such anger will not do.

For that's another chilling lesson we should take from this little story – that the anger born of our pride, born of our

cherished distinctions and identities, is an anger eventually leveled at Christ himself, the Christ we say we love and admire. Just like those people in Nazareth admired him before they tried to kill him. Because their acceptance of the Gospel was too narrow.

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