

Homily for 4th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Sometimes when we look at ourselves it really is as if we see a dim reflection in a mirror, or in the old translation, as if we were seeing ourselves through a glass darkly. What we see doesn't reflect our true worth. We fail to see the potential we really have. What can change that is simply a kind word or a touch of TLC. As St. Paul says, it is love that helps, that enables us to know us as we are known, to others who love us and especially to the one who loves us most, God. So often what we lack, or fail to give, is that affirmation that can be so important, that enables us to live and give of our best.

In the first reading, which is the beginning of the Book of Jeremiah and the beginning of his call, God knows only too well his reticence to see in himself someone who has the ability to do what God asks, to be a prophet. So it opens with God's affirmation, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you came to birth I consecrated you, I appointed you..." It is only this that helps Jeremiah take up the challenge. He needs it repeatedly throughout his life. (And he is pretty feeble at times, not to say endlessly sorry for himself.) But with it he is able to face whatever or whoever challenges him. Able to say what he knows will be unpopular. To face the times when he is locked up by his own people and threatened with death. With God's backing, God's love, he becomes the outspoken mouthpiece God needs.

His story is here today because it helps us understand Jesus. There has been nothing remarkable about Jesus up till his baptism, and not too much immediately after that. But it is his Father's affirmation, his Father's love, 'this is my Son the beloved, my favour rests on him,' that gets Jesus underway. Marks his new life. Kicks him into action.

So last week we heard of another affirmation, the anointing with the Holy Spirit, the love of God, which spurs him to stand up in front of all his family and neighbours and begin to speak in a startling new way.

If you have ever been asked to do this you will know what I mean. There was nothing so scary at first as preaching in front of your family, who I knew that when they were looking at me they knew all about me, and especially the not-so-good stuff. I could imagine them saying to each other, well that is a bit rich coming from him. (One of my cousins never fails to remind me of the time I hit him with a stone on Blackpool beach and cut his head open. I think we were about 10 or 11 at the time.)

And that is pretty much what happens to Jesus today. He stands up and makes the declarations we talked about last week, and then they start to question.

Isn't this Joseph's son? Luke then puts into Jesus' mouth the words he knows they are saying behind his back or are in their thoughts. 'Physician, heal

thymself.’ This is an old proverb from that time that sort of means, ‘before you start telling us what to do, what about sorting your own life out first.’

For many of us, when we get criticism like that, it rocks us and in some cases can stop us ever doing anything like that again. But if we have people who will affirm us, will strengthen us, then we can go ahead. In his Father this is what Jesus has. This is the key to their relationship, they work together. It is what the Trinity at work is about. The Spirit is the love that flows between and from them.

So instead of going back into his shell, the attacks become a chance for Jesus to tell us something of what his plan, his Father’s plan, is all about, and to explain it to anyone who will listen.

In fact the rejection becomes an opportunity (as it can for us in real life if we are able to face it.)

Jesus picks two scenes from the Old Testament. He chooses two prophets, Elijah and Elisha, and two stories that everyone in the synagogue would have known really well.

Do you remember who Elijah went to see, or the man who came to Elisha for healing, he is saying? Do you remember what sort of people they were? The widow from Zarephath and Naaman. And the answer is, of course, Gentiles.

This is another thing that horrifies those Jews in the synagogue that day, he claims to be a prophet but also that his message includes the outsiders. Those outside Israel as they knew it. He is redefining what Israel is, who God loves. Luke begins his gospel here with a central part of his message, that the gospel is for Gentiles as well as Jews, it is for the whole world. A universal message. In the original meaning of the word, ‘A catholic message.’

St. Paul and Luke are the outstanding messengers for us, the Gentiles. But they remind us too that the overwhelming gift of God, without which nothing works, and which has no boundaries either, is love.

Love simply challenges all those barriers we put up about who is acceptable and who is not, about who can marry who and who cannot. It rejects the idea that anyone is outside the power of love.

It also reminds us, asks of us, that we can love in many ways, and that those small acts of affirmation, of encouragement, are so necessary.

Luke’s gospel is summed up in last week’s and this week’s story. It is a gospel for the poor, as he read last week, and for the Gentile, the outsider as we see today.

And this is the Church Jesus wants us to build. But St. Paul’s message today is simple, for all our human plans, without love, all our efforts will be fruitless.