

The Sermon at Nazareth

On Friday morning this week the first reading at Morning Prayer was from the Apocrypha - those books that didn't make it into the Old Testament, but were considered of interest. The reading was from Judith, a story of a heroine of the Israelites, known for her wisdom as well as her bravery and down right cleverness. In the reading the community leaders come to Judith for her wisdom and she says these words, "Who are you to put God to the test? You cannot plumb the depths of the human heart or understand the workings of the human mind; how do you expect to search out God, and find out his mind or comprehend his thoughts." How true I thought! We want to make God like us - with minds like ours and with human emotions like ours. Yet we don't fully understand the human brain, the soul, all that makes us individual and unique - so how can we attempt to know the mind of God which is beyond us and certainly beyond our comprehension?

Yet, how do we glimpse something of what God is like?

Well, through the Bible I hear you all think! Yes, this is Bible Sunday and in the scriptures we discover an account of the relationship between God and humans over a couple of thousand years of history and more. The Bible has history, poetry, battles, blood, gore, sex and just about every facet of human experience and existence that you can think of in its primitive setting. It has been said that 3/4 of the world's population believe that the Bible is the 'Word of God'¹ If not 'the word of God' then a 'word from God' - often described as 'God breathed' or inspired. It seems obvious to us that this will be so for Jews and Christians but many others such as Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs believe that the Bible comes from God. And so the Bible has been at the heart of human lives through thousands of years - affecting language, ethics, politics and morals. It is however, for Christians, oh so much more, as through it we get to know Jesus Christ who shows us what God is like, "if you have seen me, you have seen the Father," Jesus says. In his short life Jesus could only begin to give us knowledge of the Father, it is still only a fraction, but it shows us a God of love and forgiveness, a God who gives to us all the time and for all time, because he gave us Jesus his Son - he gave us part of himself in a sacrifice that we remember each time we gather together.

In today's gospel we discover Jesus in his home town of Nazareth. We hear that he has been in Galilee and has been performing miracles and his old neighbours and townsfolk have heard of these.

¹ John Bowker, *The Complete Bible Handbook*, (London, DK, 1998), p.6

Put yourself into the scene. It's Friday night and Jesus has arrived in his home town and he goes to the synagogue "as is his custom" - oh yes, Jesus was a regular attendee at synagogues, wherever he was - he would go each week to worship just like us today, just like Jewish people did on Friday or Saturday. Well, he arrives at the building and it is heaving, its packed, hard to get a seat in the place and nowhere left to park your donkey outside! They've even run out of weekly bulletin sheets and have got chairs and benches filling up the central aisle. Why? Well, because the 'local Rabbi made good' was coming back to town. They'd heard he had performed miracles nearby and his fame was spreading. The sick were being healed, the blind were seeing again and the crippled were getting up and walking unaided. This kind of stuff gets talked about, the news had spread. 'What would he do here?' 'This could be good.' 'I wonder what he will look like now?'

So here he was at last. Jesus the son of Joseph the carpenter! So they sang some songs just like we do, they had a prayer or two, just like us, they had a reading from the Scriptures just like us, except their's was from what we now call the Old Testament and was from the law of Moses. Then it was the custom for the guest of honour to pick a text from the scriptures, from the prophets and to give a sermon on it. So Jesus stands up - that was a mark of respect for the word of God - standing there, he is given the scroll, or to us the book, of Isaiah and he finds just the place he was looking for. Jesus knew his scriptures well - he knew exactly what he was looking for! He read from Isaiah 58, because it summed up his whole ministry - his core values - and so he read, "The Lord God has appointed me to preach good news to the poor, to heal the blind and sick, to set free those who are oppressed." Jesus then closed the book and he sat down. This was the sign that he would preach - you see, people sat down to preach as these were now words of mortals - but little were they prepared for what he would say! He said, "These words are fulfilled in your hearing."

Then - silence! You can almost hear people thinking - what will come next? - will this be a good sermon? I wonder if I will need one or two sweets today?

But, nothing happens! - Wow that's a bit short! Nice choice of words! I like short sermons! - but boy was that short!!! What does he mean? And then someone twigs, just around the middle of the synagogue, "these words refer to the Messiah!" Murmuring starts, "Where did he get that idea!" How come he got so wise?" Isn't this the son of Mary who is sitting just over there?" "Aren't those his brothers standing there, Judas, Joses and Simon?" "Aren't those his sisters?" He's just the common kid from Nazareth - he helped water our donkeys. He helped his dad out in the family business. There's nothing special about him! "Who does he think he is?"

Then Jesus speaks again - "A prophet is not accepted in his own home."
Now this was true of Isaiah funnily enough and Elisha too - great prophets who couldn't do miracles in their own towns. "Oh, now he thinks he is a great prophet!" So the people rise up, they are offended and they run Jesus out of the synagogue to kill him. What a scandal - this guy thinks he is a great prophet one minute and that he's the Messiah the next! No way! That's outrageous, it's just little Jesus we used to know - he played down the street - no way he could be a prophet - no way that God could come to earth in such an ordinary and common way - he's just the boy from the town - miracles - no way, folk must be making it up!

The people there that day were offended that God actually became a human being - that was the scandal, that was the stumbling block!

You see, the Messiah was going to be super successful - a son of King David - a hero - "not little Jesus of Nazareth that we knew years ago, and he can't even do us a miracle!"

Jesus didn't die that day - his time was not yet! He would die when he had performed more miracles and when God knew the time was right - God would perform the greatest miracle of all - God brought Jesus back to his disciples after he had been killed on a cross and been dead and placed in a tomb. God brought Jesus back to them and for us. The disciples were the first witnesses of the greatest miracle of all time. A baby born in a poor stable becomes a prophet, a healer, a miracle worker who is the Son of God, who is killed but rises again to show all of humankind just what God is like. God is full of surprises, God is full of love and forgiveness and new beginnings and so much more, that we can never really describe him or it.

We poor human beings have tried to describe, with the help of God, all that we feel in gratitude and thanksgiving, and much of this we find in the Bible. I have given a very brief idea of what the Bible contains - a glimpse of God - the greatest story ever told! - so go and grab your Bibles when you get home. Put them somewhere accessible, give them a place of honour, for in it we encounter God, we get a glimpse of God - so - keep reading!
Amen.