

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19; Ps 71 (70); 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13; Luke 4:21-30

No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown

Luke 4:21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." 22 All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" 23 He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" 24 And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. 25 But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; 26 yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. 27 There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." 28 When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. 30 But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This scene continues the foundational portrait of Jesus as a prophet (see last week's notes for the explanation of the *tableau*). The repetition of v. 21 serves to join this reading with the Gospel used last week. What is genuinely puzzling in the reading is the sudden, apparently unprovoked attack constructed on the basis of the *possibly* negative "Is not this Joseph's son?" (Luke 4:22). Of course, in other contexts (see below) this is indeed negative. Perhaps the question assumes a negative value on account of the Infancy narrative in Luke 1-2, from which the reader, at least, knows that this question regarding the origins of Jesus is not the

correct one to ask.

In the same vein, Jesus has not yet been to Capernaum in this Gospel, so the observation in v. 24 seems out of sequence, revealing an awareness that the synagogue story actually belongs later in the Gospel narrative.

As the second part of the great *tableau*, this scene takes us into the ministry of Jesus, the opening to the Gentiles and the reaction of (most of) the Jewish people to this. Eventually, the religious authorities, not the people, will move decisively against Jesus.

KIND OF WRITING

The full scene, running from 4:14 to 4:30, is a Lucan symbolic *tableau*, which gives, in the manner of an overture, the themes and even the plot of the whole Gospel of Luke, including the negative reaction to the Gospel of inclusion and the eventual death and resurrection of the Messiah. It illustrates the tremendous skill of Luke as an author and, indeed, his freedom as a historian.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) Prophets should be tested: "If prophets or those who divine by dreams appear among you and promise you omens or portents, and the omens or the portents declared by them take place, and they say, 'Let us follow other gods' (whom you have not known) 'and let us serve them' you must not heed the words of those prophets or those who divine by dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you indeed love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul." (Deuteronomy 13:1-3)

(ii) Elijah and the widow of Zarephath

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to

Thought for the day

Probably all of us have experience of "small town Ireland" (or wherever). The limited set of expectations limits what we can see and recognise in others. It may even be that we are both victims and perpetrators! Familiarity does not always breed esteem. This is even true in the faith: we can be so "familiar" with it all that any sense of energy or newness has long since dissipated. And yet, we *should* allow ourselves to be surprised by the God of surprises: "See, I am making all things new." (Revelation 21:5) This newness of the Gospel is more radical than mere novelty: it is a new creation in Christ. New wine, new wineskins!

Prayer

God of the new, help us shake off the shackles of familiarity and come once more with open hearts and lives to hear again your prophet Jesus. Amen.

feed you." So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink." As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." But she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth." She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah. (1Kings 17:8-16)

(iii) The story of Elisha and Namaan the Syrian: 2 Kings 5:1-14 (too long to quote).

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) *Here is the basic historical version of the scene in Nazareth:*

Jesus left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offence at him. Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief. (Mark 6:1–6) Cf. Matthew 13:54-58.

(ii) *The reaction to a sermon of Stephen in the Acts is instructive:*

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.” When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen (Acts 7:51–55)

(iii) *Widows and lepers in Lk-Acts*

Widows: Luke 2:37; 4:25–26; 7:12; 18:3, 5; 20:28, 47; 21:2–3; Acts 6:1; 9:39, 41

Lepers: Luke 17:11-19 — a story which includes a “foreigner” in the person of the Samaritan.

ST PAUL

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. (Romans 10:12)

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the

commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it (Eph 2:11–17)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 21 This resumes the last line of last Sunday’s reading. It proclaims Jesus as the fulfilment of the Jewish Scriptures. Luke is always keen to root Jesus in the mother religion of all Christians.

Verse 22 The reaction is positive, with a possible hesitation expressed in the question, implying a claim to familiarity. There is no hint of the animosity to come.

Verse 23 A well-known type of proverb, with a special echo, in this Gospel, at the crucifixion: *‘And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!”’* (Luke 23:35) Jesus does eventually get to Capernaum: *‘He went down to Capernaum, a city in Galilee, and was teaching them on the sabbath.’* (Luke 4:31)

Verse 24 A widely attested saying: Matthew 13:57 and John 4:44.

Verses 25-26 The argument is that God’s agent of salvation (in this case Elijah) was not sent especially to Israel. The sentiment is inflammatory and unlikely to be historical. The historical Jesus encounters remarkably few Gentiles in the course of his ministry.

Verse 27 The colourful story of Naaman the Syrian makes exactly the same point. It is not without relevance that in Luke (only) Jesus heals the ten lepers and only one—a Samaritan—comes back to give thanks. From the pejorative Jewish perspective, Samaritans were regarded as foreigners (which they were not, of course).

Verse 28 Rage? The kind of feeling envisaged is well captured in another incident in the Acts of the Apostles, when Paul’s preaching in Ephesus

threatens the pre-eminence and economy of Artemis / Diana: “When they heard this, they were enraged and shouted, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”” (Acts 19:28)

Verse 29 This verse anticipates the end of Jesus’ ministry, when people will indeed take him out of the town to execute him. Cf. *Then they dragged Stephen out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.* (Acts 7:58)

Verse 30 The inexplicable, sovereign escape alludes most likely to the resurrection. Further echoes are (i) the story of the elusive Elijah in 1 Kings 18:7-12, who is mysterious taken up by the Spirit of God and (ii) the stories of the escapes from prison in Acts 12:6-11 (Peter) and Acts 16:25-28 (Paul).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The people of Nazareth could not accept that this local boy was one to teach them. It can be difficult for us to see those close to us as people through whom God is going to reveal some truth to us. Yet what a difference when we drop our prejudices and are open to what is being said. Perhaps you have experienced this?

2. The anger of the people arose when Jesus confronted them with God’s inclusive ways. God was ‘their God’ and God’s blessings were for them. Jesus reminded them that this is not God’s way. When have you been challenged to think in new ways and not to be excluding some people from your thoughts or concerns? Was there good news for you in the challenge?

3. Jesus continued his work despite the opposition. Have there been times when despite opposition you have been able to ‘walk through the people’ and ‘continue on your way’? Have you seen this courage in others?

PRAYER

God of salvation, in your Prophet, Jesus the Christ, you announce freedom and summon us to conversion. As we marvel at the grace and power of your word, enlighten us to see the beauty of the gospel and strengthen us to embrace its demands.

Grant this through your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love

1 Cor 12:31 But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

1 Cor 13:1 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

1 Cor 13:4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

1 Cor 13:8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

1 Corinthians 13—so familiar from weddings—is read only once on Sundays in the three-year lectionary. One suggestion: as we hear it, we can substitute our own name for the word “love”—an effective way to hear the reading with freshness and force.

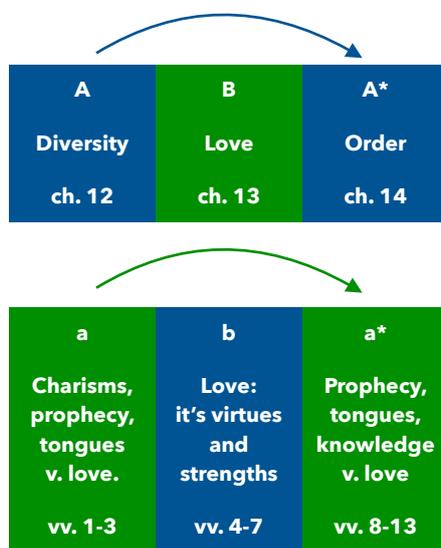
CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The setting is always the tendency of some Corinthian Christian to rivalry, even in spiritual matters. Paul’s technique is to disqualify such status seeking by starting with the “foolishness” of God in chapter 1 and by declaring the highest gift to be love, which is open equally to all without distinction, in chapter 13.

KIND OF WRITING

Paul can write very poetically and it is often thought that his best effort is here in 1 Corinthians 13. It is very beautiful in Greek, but even in English it is very rich in images, repetitions and evocation. Read it slowly and see what happens.

Paul is using a particular kind of rhetorical called epideictic, which means “praise” rhetoric. Normally, this is to praise *someone* and the rhetorical handbooks suggested topics for selection—usually beginning with external circumstances, then going on to physical attributes and ending with the qualities of the character. Quite appropriately, in praise of love Paul *personifies* which is understandable when you think that the epideictic genre was mainly for praising individuals.



Chapter 13 is the centrepiece of a larger persuasion. In ch. 12, the *issue* of diversity is raised and in ch. 14 it is *resolved* by Paul using the *criterion* of love, developed in ch. 13. But even chapter 13 itself has a tripartite layout. As before, the centrepiece is love—its virtues and strengths. There is also a linear development. Paul raises the *issues* in vv. 1-3; he establishes *criteria* in vv. 4-7 and finally he *applies* the criteria in vv. 8-13.

RELATED PASSAGES

Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the law. (Romans 13:8)

Love does no wrong to a neighbour.

Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law. (Romans 13:10)

For the whole law can be summed up in a single commandment, namely, “You must love your neighbour as yourself.” (Galatians 5:14)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 31 Paul is playing with the false ambitions of the Corinthians.

Verses 1-3 Under the guise of “if” sentences, Paul really names the false spiritual rivalry of some Corinthians. The conclusions are striking: instead of fluency, cacophony; instead of renown, nothing; instead of reputation for boasting, no gain whatsoever. He even risks contradicting a teaching of Jesus about have faith that could indeed move mountains...

Verses 4-7 Having presented the case for love negatively in vv. 1-3, Paul goes on to give a constructive description. It merits very close reading and application to our own practice and person. The teaching is not at all esoteric or elitist: *anyone* can grasp it and *all* are called to it.

Verses 8-13 Temporal considerations are used to expose the limited shelf life of the more more exuberant gifts: they will all come to an end, just as childhood comes to an end. All our understanding *now* is limited pending the disclosure at the end. Finally, Paul parades a favourite triad, in ascending order of significance. Why is love the greatest? Only by the practical living of love do we integrate our faith and hope, becoming a new creation in Christ.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Take the central paragraph and insert your own name instead of the word love: it makes for a striking invitation.
2. Love never ends: this is apparently not true and yet, we know in faith, it is absolutely true precisely because God is love.

PRAYER

Creator God, you made us in your own image and likeness. Saviour God, you have made us a new creation in the image of your Son Jesus. In-breathing God, you have poured your own Holy Spirit into the hearts of believers. May we rejoice in who we are; may our joy help us to become so more and more.

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you

Jer. 1:1 *The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, 2 to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. 3 It came also in the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.*

Jer. 1:4 Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,
 5 “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”
 6 *Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”*
 7 *But the Lord said to me,*
“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’;
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you,
 8 *Do not be afraid of them,*
for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.”
 9 *Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth;*
and the Lord said to me,
“Now I have put my words in your mouth.
 10 *See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,*
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.”

Jer. 1:11 *The word of the Lord came to me, saying, “Jeremiah, what do you see?” And I said, “I see a branch of an almond tree.” 12 Then the Lord said to me, “You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.”*

13 *The word of the Lord came to me a second time, saying, “What do you see?” And I said, “I see a boiling pot, tilted away from the north.” 14 Then the Lord said to me: Out of the north disaster shall break out on all the inhabitants of the land. 15 For now I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, says the Lord; and they shall come and all of them shall set their thrones at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its surrounding walls and against all the cities of Judah. 16 And I will utter my judgments against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have made offerings to other gods, and worshiped the works of their own hands. 17 But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before them. 18 And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. 19 They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This is such a great and important reading that the full version is given here. In the lectionary, only vv. 4-5 and 17-19 are appointed to be read.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Jeremiah wrote before and during the Babylonian Exile. Today’s story is the call of Jeremiah, which includes all the features of prophetic calling. Because Luke presents Jesus primarily as prophet-martyr; the call of Jeremiah is offered this Sunday and the call of Isaiah next Sunday.

KIND OF WRITING

The call story has a simple shape:
 Auditory experience: vv. 4-10
 Vision I: vv. 11-12
 Vision II: vv. 13-19

RELATED READINGS

For the important Moses parallels, see:

But Moses said to the Lord, “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” Then the Lord said to him, “Who gives

speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.” But he said, “O my Lord, please send someone else.” Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, “What of your brother Aaron, the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad. You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him. Take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs.” (Ex 4:10–17)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 4 The classic opening of a prophetic oracle and very frequent in Jeremiah: Jer 1:2, 4, 11, 13; 2:1, etc.

Verse 5 The auditory part begins. Known from the womb means that Jeremiah was not a self-appointed prophet. His calling is not simply to the people of Israel, but to the nations. Cf. v. 10.

Verse 17 To gird your loins = prepare for an ordeal, a struggle. God is adamant: the prophet must fulfil his/her role or else...!

Verse 18 At the same time, God will make Jeremiah into a formidable bearer of his word: a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall.

Verse 19 The divine guarantee—an echo of God’s word to Moses—is repeated, thus closing the scene.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The sense of being known / loved from the womb is a very powerful, life-giving image. It points to unshakable reassurance, something we may be suspicious of today, but surely part of a living faith.

2. “I will be with you” or, indeed, Emmanuel is a name for God with a long echo in Jewish and Christian traditions.

PRAYER

God, you call us to be prophets in our day, however difficult, and we place our trust in you and in your word, that you will be always with us. Let our prayer always be: Here am I, Lord!

THE LITURGY

Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19; Ps 71 (70); 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13; Luke 4:21-30

READINGS 1 AND 3

The future threat of opposition prepared well for the Gospel, which foreshadows the opposition Jesus will meet.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The psalm recounts confidence in God—surely needed in the case of Jeremiah!

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19

What is a prophet? The call of Jeremiah captures something of the role and challenge. It might help to call to mind prophets in our own day, people who speak out awkward truths.

Second reading

1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13

This is a great reading—very rich and poetic. Love is praised as a person and we can see ourselves in the portrait.

Gospel

Luke 4:21-30

This is the second half of a symbolic *tableau*, foreshadowing the later ministry of Jesus: the opposition he would encounter and his victory in resurrection. Jesus stands in the tradition of those prophets who suffered for their message and often paid for it with their lives.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 31 January

St John Bosco, priest

2 Samuel 15:13-14, 30, 16:5-13

David is found out and rightly condemned — he accepts the critique in a surprisingly humble manner.

Mark 5:1-20

This story is not without its humorous exaggeration, as the pigs request a “stay” of execution! The overall intent is deadly serious: the forces of evil are comprehensively destroyed.

Tuesday 1 February

St Brigid, abbess and secondary patron of Ireland

There is a choice of first readings today.

Job 31:16-20, 24-25, 31-32

The reading is offered because it reflects on generosity towards the needy, a key characteristic of St Brigid. It would be great if we could all say the same about ourselves!

Ephesians 3:14-21

This wonderful prayer is chosen to reflect the single-minded devotion to God and Christ which marked the life of St Brigid.

Luke 6:32-38

The teaching on compassion is very appropriate for the feast because in the Bible this is a feminine image of God. Compassion is needed today as never before.



Wednesday 2 February

The Presentation in the Temple

Malachi 3:1-4

This rather fierce prophecy was offered at a time of religious reconstruction after disaster. There is no mistaking the plain meaning that it is the leadership which is in need of purification.

Hebrews 2:14-18

As we can see from the stories of his birth, Jesus can help us because he is one of us. This closing of the gap with humanity makes him the ideal priest, mediating God’s grace to us all.

Luke 2:22-40

There are so few elderly people in the New Testament, that it is delightful to find such wonderful characters as Sime-

on and Anna, still full of faith in old age.

Thursday 3 February

St Blaise, bishop and martyr

1 Kings 2:1-4, 10-12

The tumultuous career of David comes to a close and, as his death approaches, he has advice for Solomon, his son and successor.

Mark 6:7-13

Jesus empowers the twelve to undertake the very same ministry of proclaiming and healing. They are to travel light, taking nothing extra that might impede them and also taking the risk of being welcomed *or not*, as the case may be.

Friday 4 February

Ecclesiasticus 47:2-13

David’s status grew after the Exile in Babylon. Our reading today is a late Jewish reflection, which helps us to see how people viewed David just before the time of Jesus, himself a son of David.

Mark 6:14-29

At the hands of Mark, the death of John the Baptism foreshadows the destiny of Jesus. The arbitrariness of John’s beheading—to honour an oath spoken in a frivolous moment—is still shocking.

Saturday 5 February

St Agatha, virgin and martyr



1 Kings 3:4-13

This scene is a key to Solomon’s reputation for wisdom. God’s makes a very open offer to Solomon and, significantly, he opts to the spiritual gifts, which would make him famous.

Mark 6:30-34

It is instructive to see that Jesus himself was aware of need to balance life and work, prayer and ministry. This is true of us all in our different roles.

At the same time, Jesus felt compassion for the crowd and, in spite of the need of rest and refreshment, actually responded to their need.