

Donnybrook

30 January 2022

Welcome

Last Sunday, we celebrated the Sunday of the Word of God. It provided a chance to reflect on the place of the Scriptures in our lives as individual believers, as members of the church and as a worshipping community. Last Sunday's Gospel ended with the words: this text is being fulfilled today even as you listen. That sentence is also the first sentence of today's Gospel.

Topic

In fact, the two gospels form one large *tableau* introducing Jesus, the Gospel and the missionary outreach of the faith. To put it in a different way, Luke 4:14-30 tells two stories: it tells the story of Jesus and it tells the story of the emerging Christian movement. The double story speaks directly to us today.

Steps

(1) A small bit of history may help. The historical Jesus had a mission, but it seems to have been really confined to his own people, the Jews. There are traces of this in Matthew's Gospel where we hear occasionally:

So he answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."
(Matthew 15:24)

Jesus sent out these twelve, instructing them as follows: "Do not go on a road that leads to Gentile regions and do not enter any Samaritan town. Go instead to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. (Matthew 10:5-6)

If you try to count how many Gentiles the historical Jesus meets, it turns out to be very, very few and some of the stories are symbolic rather than historical.

(2) In spite of that, from earliest days the Christian community enjoyed a large influx of Gentile members. The inclusion of outsiders immediately created problems which can be traced in the letters of St Paul and the Acts of the Apostles. Jews, in those days and today, treasured certain practices, which we may call identity markers. These included: male circumcision, strict dietary laws and Sabbath observance. Should everyone have to observe these?

The conflict was both heated and complex. If you would like to sample the intensity, you could read Galatians or Acts 10:1-11:18, the story of the conversion of Cornelius. In all these energetic discussions, nobody quoted the opinion of Jesus. If they could have, they would have referred to Jesus' own practice and teaching. This is because there was none on this matter, precisely because Jesus had no mission to Gentiles, met very few non-Jews, never ate with them and left no opinion on the matter. The early church had to make up its own mind when it came to the outreach to non-Jews. They struggled but

eventually they decided that no conditions would be laid down: all are welcome without distinction. As St Paul says elsewhere:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female –for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

As a consequence, the offending mentions of Elijah and Elisha in today's Gospel, marking an outreach to non-Israelites, do not tell the story of the ministry of Jesus but instead tell the story of the early church. The great innovation of the inclusion of the Gentiles is grounded in the stories of the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian, a kind of biblical precedent.

(3) These observations may help us read today's Gospel intelligently. Do they help us in any way today? I think the answer is yes in two ways.

The first more general comment is this. Our society has evolved, I think positively, in the last couple of decades. Specifically, there is a kindness and a compassion for those previously on the margins: broadly the LGBTQI+ community, those experiencing marriage breakdowns, people of different races, the place of women in society. It is not impossible for the Christian tradition to learn from such kindness and compassion, expressions fundamentally of respect and justice. Of course there will be a struggle – as we can see from our neighbours in Christchurch in Sandymount.

The second is quite specific. For our synodal pathways, Pope Francis has asked us to go to the people on the margins. He uses the term periphery. Not everyone likes the term, partly because it unfamiliar and partly because it seems to place the church in the centre. It is more likely that the church on the periphery of people's lives. In any case, the goal is to open conversation with people who have walked away – whether angry or sad or indifferent – so as to listen to them and learn from them. Again, it is not easy to do this, even on a practical level here in this parish. As they say, watch this space!

Conclusion

So, today's Gospel reading and last Sunday's are all one big *tableau*. In my opinion, two stories are recounted: the destiny of Jesus and the emergence of a radically inclusive church, both quite challenging for us today.

Let me close with a 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. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.