Sermon for 3rd in Ordinary Year C

Readings: Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

i

Standing outside in a town square listening from dawn until noon to someone reading from the Bible, tells us straight away that this is a story from another age.

I am reminded of the way in which John Wesley could stand in the street in Newcastle upon Tyne at 5.00am in the morning, sing Psalm 100, and have a crowd of over a hundred people gathered by the end of it to which he could then preach a sermon. I know that street in Newcastle and it is a world away from Wesley’s Newcastle.

The fact that Ezra needs to hand over to the Levites to explain what he has just read to the people tells us that time moves on within the Biblical age as well as our own. History has never stood still and after the couple of generations in Exile in Babylon, the newly re-established state of Israel needs help to understand its own history and culture.

Ezra not only opens up the mysteries of their past, but also, inevitably, puts his own stamp on the interpretation and thereby changes the nature of Judaism in the process. Ezra and his school of thought rework the whole of their history; their literary fingerprints are found on the stories that precede the Exile as well as shaping most of what was to follow. Ezra and his school of thought leave their fingerprints from the creation story in Genesis to Malachi.

This is what gifted teachers and leaders do in all spheres of human endeavour. They reshape the story of the past in order to set it off in a new direction – be that science, history, politics or religion. The Bible does not stand on its own. There is no such thing as *sola scriptura* – there is always the interpretation of the tradition and the cultural understandings of the time in both the preacher and in those who listen.

That is why Tradition and Experience also feature in Wesley’s famous “Quadrilateral”, alongside Scripture and Reason.

Through Ezra’s influence, post-exilic Judaism became much more tightly regulated by the priests and Temple. Ritual purification rose to prominence, interpreted by Ezra to include racial purity and exclusiveness against a more international interpretation given by other OT figures, such as Isaiah of Babylon. So Ezra tries to break up inter-marriages between Jews and Samaritans and other foreigners – a policy that was ridiculed and written against by whoever wrote the story of Jonah in the whale – the reluctant saviour of Ninevah, the city saved by a God who was just too benevolent for Jonah’s taste.

Jesus does exactly the same thing when he reinterprets the scriptures at Nazareth. During the course of his ministry, Jesus gives a new definition to the concept of the Messiah. He gives a new definition to the meaning of the Law. He gives a new definition to the Chosen People, Israel. He gives a new definition to the Temple. He gives a new definition to the Day of Judgement. He gives a new definition to the meaning of salvation.

Jesus is using the same scriptures as the scribes who follow Ezra’s interpretation, but he takes the tradition in a radically new direction.

ii

When the people had heard the explanation of the Law from the Levites, they began to cry. Religion can do that to you.

It’s not that religion is manipulative, irrational and swept by mass hysteria – although religion – like politics – can be those things in the hands of charlatans. It’s just that religion touches people in deep places. It deals with ultimate things. It you’re not emotionally affected by religion at all then you are not taking it seriously.

Religion also – just like politics and artistic taste or scientific theory and a whole host of other things – divides people’s opinions.

Most of the people were clearly happy to go along with Ezra’s redefinition of Judaism. The Book of Jonah tells us that not everybody was convinced.

Jesus has the same divisive impact. The people of Nazareth wanted to throw him off the nearest cliff. Scribes, Pharisees and priests managed to nail him to a cross. Ever since, his disciples have been welcomed in some places and thrown to the lions in others.

All major religions have the aspiration to bring a harmonious peace to the whole human family. All would be “catholic” in their own sense of the word.

St. Paul’s image of the body is one of the most enlightened and gracious images of achieving such unity of mind and heart whilst allowing for the natural diversity that the human family inevitably embraces. Yet unity is the ultimate goal – because all belong to the same God who created us and all need the same salvation from their sins.

Today, not even all Christians would want to endorse such a sentiment. That shows just how precarious all schemes of unity are, especially in politics and religion, where sometimes the need for a healthy diversity loses out to the demands of political or religious unity. Coercion has often been the result. We see it to this day in various parts of the world. Where diversity triumphs, unity often shatters.

It is ironical and reassuring at the same time that Paul’s eirenic image of the diverse parts of the body working in harmony under the guidance of the head is found among some of the most contentious letters ever written by Paul – his so-called angry letter to the Corinthians. Disputes and divisions have always been a reality in the Church no matter what our aspirations.

Long-lasting division, rivalries and unforgiven past wrongs have hindered the work of the Gospel for centuries, especially the great schisms between East and West and the later breach of the Reformation – a reform movement that has disintegrated into innumerable protestant factions over the past 500 years. We should never act as if these divisions don’t matter, just because they seem intractable.

Yet at the same time, religion, like politics calls for a decision, for a choice. Are you for it or against it? By their very nature, politics and religion seem to divide the world.

I am by nature a person who wants to hold everything and everyone together in harmony. It’s just my nature. Some might say it’s because I’m a Libran, born under the sign of the Scales.

I sometimes worry that my desire for unity might have led me to some wrong decisions had I lived in past times:

* Would I have dared leave my Anglican heritage and join with the schismatic Methodists?
* Would I have dared abandon the great Mother Church, despite her failings, and followed Luther and his Reformers?
* Would I have dared leave the Law of Moses as handed down since ancient days and followed a carpenter’s son?

God has been gracious to me before I was even born in decreeing that I should not live through such momentous epochs. I fear I would have failed the challenge of their times.

So we stand divided still even within the same Christian household:

* Is the ordination of women a sign that in Christ there truly is “neither male nor female”?
* Is the acceptance of gay marriage a long-overdue recognition that the ethic of love must take precedence, or it is a wilful denial of what the Bible teaches us?
* Is contraception a gift to the world to manage its ever more pressured resources, or a selfish manipulation of life itself to suit our economic ends?

Even if we ever agree on those questions, we will probably still be arguing whether aliens can be ordained.

iii

So let us look briefly at the summary Jesus gave in Nazareth of what he thought faith was all about.

Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit which came upon him at his Baptism was in him still in his words to the people of Nazareth. Jesus was not being deluded.

His fame and his honour[[1]](#footnote-1) after his remarkable healings performed in Capernaum were such that he was invited to read the scriptures in the synagogue.

He then sat down to teach, assuming the privileges of a rabbi, and then Jesus re-interpreted their scriptures and applied them to himself.

That was a revolution. That was a challenge. That called for a response – it was too momentous a thing to be disregarded as you might disregard a point made in a Sunday sermon, if you happened not to agree with the preacher.

The first line of attack was to question whether they had done the right thing in extending to Jesus the honour and privilege of a rabbi by allowing him to read their scriptures and address the congregation. Wasn’t he just the son of Joseph the carpenter, after all?

There is implied insult in that remark.

There is implied rebuke in Jesus’ reply.

“A prophet is not welcomed in his own territory” is a way of suggesting that the Jewish people may not be the best judges of the situation. Jesus’ new wine would burst the old wineskins, so to speak.

Naturally, they didn’t like having their judgement questioned - who does? But that is what Jesus continues to do. What do you judge Jesus to have been about?

Jesus’ summary is this - taken from Isaiah 61:1-2:

* He is for the poor. Those who have such wealth and power that they are more interested in retaining what they have in this world rather than building up treasures for the eternal city are not going to say yes to Jesus.
* Prisoners were not always extended what we today call justice. They were imprisoned on the whim of the powerful and wealthy or the foreign imperial power. People with the power in this world to decree what is right and wrong are not going to submit readily to the authority of Christ.
* The blind of Isaiah 61 stand for all the ill, handicapped and economically incapacitated. Those the world is tempted to write off as worthless are precious in God’s sight.
* The oppressed stand for all those whose faces do not conform to the ruling elite of the age – those discriminated against because of their faith, ethnicity, gender, social class and so on; Jesus works by other rules and they overrule much of what the world operates by.

With an agenda such as this, it is no wonder that Jesus divides opinion. It divided it then in Nazareth and it divides it today in homes, factories, board rooms, class rooms, debating chambers and courtrooms.

Much as I would like everyone to agree together and live in perfect harmony – Jesus places me on the spot. Do I choose him or another? The choice is mine and it is yours. Which do we choose?

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March 2015

1. See Sermon 4th in Advent Year C for honour system in Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)