

The Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany, 28 January 2007  
Parish Annual Meeting Sunday  
St. Paul's Parish, Kent  
The Rev. Allen LaMontagne, Rector

*A sermon preached on the lessons and Gospel as follows: Jeremiah 1.4-10;  
Psalm 71.1-6; 1 Corinthians 13.1-13; Luke 4.14-30*

If you were not here last week, I said then that because the Gospel we have today is part of the story that begins in the Gospel last week, I would preach a sermon in two parts. To recap last week, let me paraphrase the Gospel preceding today's in Luke, Chapter Four.

*please read Luke 4.14-30*

In stark contrast to events recorded in the Gospel today, the congregation is initially delighted with Jesus. What they hear is how Isaiah's words speak *to them*. Some must think themselves poor in comparison to others. "Sight to the blind" tells them Jesus is a healer. *Such a good one, this Son of Joseph is, now grown up*. "Release the captives" reminds them of their relationship to Roman rulers. "To let the oppressed go free" must affirm the idea of rebelling, throwing off the chains of the Roman Empire. What gracious and energizing words. They love him.

But things change. Jesus knows what the people want. They focus on him as a man, and want his attention on *them*. They want him to do for them what they hear he does for others--healing, miracles, turning water into wine. But he rebuffs those wishes. Instead, he talks about people *beyond* the Jewish community of faith, outsiders, non-Jews who enjoy God's favor: Jesus mentions two: a Syrian Army general--occasionally an enemy of the Jews, and a Pheonician widow. He speaks in terms of Love about God's mission *in the world*.

But they don't see this. What they hear is that "others" may receive preferential treatment--an enemy general, no less. Imagine an American minister giving aid and comfort to Osama Bib Laden. To bring this idea into the sanctuary adds insult to injury. They feel a sense of betrayal. They feel threatened. They are hurt, too, as Jesus one of their own. They are blind to the fact that the message Jesus preaches is about them *in relation* to those in the world who suffer poverty, illness, oppression, and economic injustice.

Jesus could take a whole different tack that day. Remember Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ*? Jesus comes down off the Cross, and instead of dying sacrificially for the sins of the whole world, he marries and raises a family. Nothing wrong with that except that the world isn't saved. In this dreamlike sequence, Jesus doesn't do the hard work God intends him to do.

In that vein, things could go a lot differently when Jesus visits the synagogue in Nazareth, the town he grows up in. Rather than preaching in the tradition of the prophet Isaiah, he could choose simply to enjoy a hero's welcome, receive the key to the city, kiss some babies, make a speech or two and have some fun, relax with family and friends. You can see the Galilean Gazette headline, can't you? "Home town Boy Wows Them in Synagogue." "On Saturday morning, Jesus, Son of Joseph, returned triumphantly to his hometown synagogue. Regaling the local crowd with tales of recently acclaimed exploits, smiles of pride were visible throughout the morning. Jesus' stories of miracles in Cana and Capernaum delighted the large crowd gathered. A high point of the visit was the healing of a man born blind. A potluck luncheon followed in the parish hall.

I know the territory. Preparing almost every sermon, I pray about what may be going too far, what may be too political, or controversial, what may stir the pot too much, especially at a time in the life of the church when controversy appears to rule the day in many parishes and dioceses. In over a decade of preaching, I've never come close to inciting a riot. Conventional wisdom says, that's a good thing. In light of the Gospel, I am not so sure...

In the powerful film, *Schindler's List*, one of its most moving scenes is near the end. The war is nearly over. Schindler takes account of possessions he still has, his car, a ring. He calculates their worth in terms of bribes, the going rate to save a life in the sick world of Nazi economy. In anguish he breaks down, worrying he could have done more, sold the ring, the car, saved several more, even one more life. Like him, I sometimes worry, too; I don't go far enough, give enough, throw caution to the wind for God's sake...

It is said, the longer a rector stays somewhere, the more likely it is for him (or her) and the faith community to grow comfortable together. We grow accustomed to wrestling with our own "in-house" stuff, living in our own world. Lost is an awareness of the Gospel grinding against culture and vice

versa. Rather than face the challenges of transformative ministry, we settle for making nice.

Making nice is alright, but just not enough. Not while a class system is becoming more solidified in this country, the gap between rich and poor ever-widening. Not when environmentally destructive habits threaten our lives and those of our children; not when American prisons burst at the seams, so many African-American men languishing in them. Had Dr. King lived longer, I imagine the issues he would pursue in this era after the Civil Rights Bill of 1964 would be about economic justice, and not just for black people, but for all people to have a fair shot at prosperity, not just "haves" helping other "haves" to the exclusion of the welfare of have nots. It's not enough to make nice among ourselves when there is poverty, hunger, ill health without affordable or available remedies, right here in Kent County and throughout the country.

The kind of Love Paul speaks of in the Epistle today impels action that goes beyond making nice. Life is a struggle. We are resident aliens, pilgrims with feet in God's kingdom and that of this world. But we are in this together. Preaching is not something I do, and you don't. The word liturgy translates to *the work of the people*. Preaching is very much *our* job. The sermon is a conversation. I do my part, and then we go into the world, reflecting what is said and done here, your lives and mine representing the Gospel in word and deed. We are living sermons. *You and I are the Isaiah scroll.*

On this annual meeting Sunday, with the year 2007 ahead of us, I pray we become the people God is calling us to be, and that together, we do that which we are called to do as people of faith. I pray we learn how we have the means, "to bring good news to the poor; to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. To let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of our Lord's favor." In the name of God... *Amen.*