

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

30.01.2022
By Pat Bennett

Introduction

Today we return to the synagogue at Nazareth and to what happens after Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah. Initially, Jesus' words are well received but in a reversal even more speedy than that which later befalls Peter (Matthew 16:17–23), the hero of the hour rapidly becomes the villain of the piece! What is it about what Jesus says which provokes this rage? How should we respond when people say things which makes us feel unsettled, angry or defensive?

Preparation Think back to a time when you were angered by something someone said: what was at the root of your response and what was the outcome? Could/should you have responded differently?

Text

Luke 4:21–30

Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

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?”

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.’”

And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.

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;

yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.

There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.

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.

But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Comment

The mood of the passage changes totally as the initial approbation of v22 gives way to the anger of v28 – but what precipitates this? It is clearly not the words from Isaiah themselves, or even the way that Jesus links himself to them. On the contrary, it is this latter which seems to lead directly to the initial positive response. Luke uses *thaumaz* (to wonder at, marvel) in a number of key places where there is a gap between Jesus’ perceived ‘ordinariness’ and words or events surrounding him (e.g. 2:18; 2:33); and there’s a similar disjunction here as Jesus, the son of a local artisan, announces himself as a liberator sent from God. His listeners are amazed – but in a good way.

However, Jesus swiftly disperses this warm glow with his subsequent words! Is he being deliberately provocative to serve his own ends or is he simply recognising and calling out some of the implicit assumptions woven into the emotional buzz? It seems highly likely, looking at his starting point (v23), that he recognises the high probability that a certain narrative is already forming in the minds of at least some of his listeners – one in which the first and best benefits of a ‘local boy made good’ scenario will automatically, and rightly, accrue to his ‘home’ community. As happens repeatedly across the gospels, those who hear Jesus grasp something of what he is saying, but then their own well-rehearsed narratives (each with its own assumptions and understandings) take over and skew the understanding – they get it, but they don’t get it (see [this incident in Matthew](#) for a prime example).

And, just as he repeatedly does with the disciples, Jesus picks up the misapprehension and applies a corrective to it. In the well-known stories from Israel’s history which he references, Elisha and Elijah effect the work of God in places or people which sometimes defy expectation. As Amy-Jill Levine points out in her notes on this passage^[1], to assume that the subsequent anger of the listeners is indicative of xenophobia is to misunderstand Jewish history and the relations between Jews and Gentiles. Rather, the anger erupts from the realisation that they don’t have a prior claim on Jesus which guarantees prime access to, and benefit from, what seems to be on offer.

Thumos, the root word which Luke uses here (also translated as ‘wrath’) indicates ‘hot anger’ and passion – an ‘agitated condition of the feelings, an outburst of wrath from inward indignation’.[2] This is a very immediate and highly labile emotional response – boiling over quickly but not always sustained (which may explain how Jesus escapes intact) – rather than the more persistent and calculating anger (*orge*) which may lead to revenge. In this instance, the tide of emotion overwhelms any desire to listen further or try to understand what is being said and the situation descends into hot chaos – which Jesus is able to walk away from before any rash acts ensue.

[1] Amy-Jill Levine, *The Annotated Jewish New Testament* (Oxford: OUP, 2011) p.107.

[2] W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (London: Oliphant, 1978), vol. I, p. 55-6; vol IV, p. 239.

Response

Simeon’s insight (Lk 2: 34-35a) of Jesus as being contradiction’s sign begins to play out here in ways which give us a number of lenses through which to further examine our picture of conflict.

Firstly Jesus recognises and exposes certain assumptions which his listeners are holding which will impede understanding. There’s a good general pointer here: what narratives and associated assumptions are we bringing to our reading of a conflict situation, and in what ways do they shape how we see and understand it? The passage also offers a more specific challenge: are we assuming particular outcomes, status or privileges because of our association with either a particular individual or community involved in a conflict situation? How do these assumptions affect our responses to what is happening?

Our awareness of such things can sometimes be quite limited and the more we know about them, the more we will be able to understand – and if necessary, work to change – some of our own patterns of speech and behaviour. How can we get a better view of these kinds of blind spots which we all have – and who or what might help us in that ongoing task?

Secondly, there’s a challenge about how we manage strong emotions in a conflict situation – especially when these become the drivers of further thought and action. As we’ve noted before, our first response to any situation – regardless of whether or not we are cognisant of it – is always rooted in the emotions. There is nothing intrinsically wrong in these reflex emotional responses *per se* – they are a completely natural part of being human. The critical question is what we then do with them – should we allow them to dictate and drive our understandings or our behaviour? Can/should we find ways of stepping back from them?

Sometimes of course it is completely right for us to be disturbed by or angry about what we hear or see – though we might still need to take time to think about how we should act on this. On other occasions though – as in this story – it may be that discomfort or anger come from a challenge to our presuppositions about privilege, or specific understandings and expectations. In such a case, we may need to find ways of staying in the situation and listening to the other person. Such listening implies neither agreement nor endorsement, but it may help us to better understanding; and better understanding can, in turn, help us towards more constructive responses.

In order to do this, it's essential that we are able to find a way to quieten our own interior noise since 'if I am completely absorbed in myself, concentrated on my own sensations, feelings, anxieties, it will obviously be impossible for me to receive, to incorporate in myself, the message of the other' [3]. Once again a better awareness of the narratives, assumptions, fears and hopes etc. driving our emotional responses will help us to make a space where better listening can happen. One of Wendell Berry's 1979 'Sabbath' Poems – 'I go among trees and sit still'[4] – gives a beautiful articulation of this and is worth spending time with (you can find an online version [here](#)).

[3] Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1948/2002) p.88.

[4] Wendell Berry, *This Day: Collected and New Sabbath Poems* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2013) p.7.

Prayer

Jesus,
when our assumptions
are challenged
or our narratives overturned
help us to stay with the discomfort
and dig deeper
in search of better understandings.

When our emotions
are running high,
help us to breathe
and may that breath
make a space
in which we can listen –
even if we don't agree.
Amen.

Further Reading

Now available via the [Resources](#) section of the website: recordings of Pádraig Ó Tuama's *Advent conversations with contributors to the Spirituality of Conflict* book.

'what were you arguing about along the way?' is a newly revised and edited collection of Spirituality of Conflict entries for years A, B and C. This volume contains introductions, reflections, responses and prayers for the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter.

Pat Bennett, theologian, scientist and liturgist (and part of the Spirituality of Conflict team since it began) has spent hundreds of hours reading through the entries, selecting and editing those entries that work well together, and compiling them together in a volume of resources that is rich with support for everyone, whether using it in preparation for preaching, or for personal or group learning. You can get it from all good bookshops, or online venues. If you can order directly from [Canterbury Press](#), or through your local bookshop, we'd be extra pleased!

Season: Epiphany

Themes: Argument and Anger