

Septuagesima 31/01/10 Luke 4:21-30

Jesus returned to Nazareth, to the section of the city where he had been brought up. As he approached his home, he was recognized. “Look who’s here! It’s Joseph’s and Mary’s son, Jesus. It’s good to see you. Where’ve you been?” Slapping Jesus on the back, they greeted him heartily. Statements like, “My, how you’ve grown. I remember when you were only this high,” and “Hey, Jesus, remember when we ...” and then compliments like, “Jesus, that chair you made us? It’s still in good shape. Levi’s weight hasn’t broken it like so many before.”

Little did these people know that when Jesus returned to Nazareth, he knew his true identity. He was not Joseph the carpenter’s son; he was God’s Son, descended from the royal line of King David. Yet Jesus did not fit the picture of royalty. He was a common man just like them; nothing extraordinary about his looks. In fact, he looked like them, dressed like them, and worshiped like them, but he did not talk like them. At synagogue worship he was invited to read from the prophet Isaiah. After rolling up the scroll, Jesus said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”

(Luke 4:21). With these words, Jesus was proclaiming himself the “anointed one,” a king in David’s line, the king through whom the promises made to David would be fulfilled. As the promised Messiah, Jesus’ ministry would focus on calling God’s people to turn from sin and return to God.

All Isaiah prophesied, Jesus would do: evangelize the poor, proclaim freedom, give sight to the blind, and release the oppressed. But the way he would accomplish it found many Jews unable to grasp. Those he came to save had a very different picture of their deliverer. Jesus did not fit the picture of a conquering king, one who would free the people from Roman occupation. Instead, Jesus was a conqueror who would free them from sin — the sin that had caused their captivity and oppression in the first place — and restore them to wholeness, to a right relationship with God.

The comments Jesus shared that day began kind words of God’s favour and grace bestowed on all people. Luke tells us that those who heard them were amazed at his insights and wisdom. Their first impression was that God was with him, but then things abruptly changed. His words became challenging, and his listeners were scandalized. “Is this not Joseph’s son?” (Luke 4:22b) they asked, surprised at his claims. Jesus did not fit the picture they had in mind of the Messiah.

First impressions are important. A person, interviewing for a high profile position, would want to make a good first impression — no blue jeans or white socks; no mini-skirt or revealing Lady Gaga top. Luke records what was first said of Jesus: “He was a prophet, who said and did many powerful things before God and all the people” (Luke 24:19). To be a prophet one must be open to God working through him. A prophet does not do God’s work under his own initiative; it is God who sends him and empowers him. The prophet’s words

were affirmed by signs and wonders. In this gospel scenario, the people didn't ask Jesus for a sign, they "demanded" one! When we adopt a demanding attitude toward God, we are trying to usurp his power. In this case, it wasn't that Jesus lacked the power; the people lacked the faith to let him use it. Too often we define how God is to work in our lives, so that when he wants to act we won't let him.

I once heard this comment, "I sometimes think that I could do a better job running the universe than God." That person has a skewed picture of God. When we decide how God should act, and he doesn't do as we prescribe, we don't recognize him when he is working. It is often said that a position of leadership should be filled by someone from the outside, not by someone from within or from the community. The outsider's advice would be accepted over the person who has been in the business or community for some time. Familiarity often breeds disrespect. Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown" (Luke 4:24). The people, who knew Jesus as a child, a teenager, and a young adult, could accept his physical growth but not his spiritual maturity. Jesus of Nazareth did not come home to set up a carpenter's shop and follow in Joseph's footsteps. He'd grown way beyond their expectations. He did not fit into the picture of the hometown boy making good, so they drove him out.

God gives each of you gifts and talents to use in building his kingdom. However, you might think that God cannot use you because "you know you." You might feel incapable of doing a certain job. You might feel ill-qualified or lacking experience. Take for example, Moses, who was considered the greatest prophet of God. Listen to him making his excuses to God for not qualifying for the job God had called him to.

*But Moses said to the Lord, "Please, Lord, I have never been a skilled speaker. Even now, after talking to you, I cannot speak well. I speak slowly and can't find the best words." Then the Lord said to him, "Who made a person's mouth? And who makes someone deaf or not able to speak? Or who gives a person sight or blindness? It is I, the Lord. Now go! I will help you speak, and I will teach you what to say." But Moses said, "Please, Lord, send someone else." — Exodus 4:10-13*

God didn't have plans for a substitute. God had plans for Moses. That plan included separation from his Hebrew family and inclusion into the royal family of Egypt. Only God could elevate a slave to a prince. God was in control, orchestrating a plan for the deliverance of his people. Then Moses' life was turned upside down.

From a basket of reeds, to an elegant bed fit for a king, to a shepherd's mat. What in the world was God doing? However, this humbling experience prepared him to be a great leader. Even though he did not connect the dots, God was painting the picture into which Moses would be placed forever. Moses, the son of slaves, was placed in Pharaoh's court as a prince of Egypt. He could have

had an “attitude.” God does not want his servants to be “puffed up.” God is noted for taking that which the world says is of no use and making it useful for his purposes. God’s power does not rest in the package in which it comes. Moses came in a basket of reeds; Jesus came in a manger of straw. You come wrapped up in grace to let God use you right in your place.

Remember, God wants to use you just as you are. It isn’t that you do great things, but that God takes the small things you do and makes them great. And so, through a shepherd, God’s power set those in bondage free — his vessel? His vessel was Moses. Through a lowly shepherd boy who killed a giant, a kingdom was built — his vessel? His vessel was David. Through a child born in a manger came the Saviour of the world — his vessel? His vessel was his Son, Jesus Christ. Our ways are not God’s ways.

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us ...” (John 1:14). Almighty God took on human form, entering our sinful world in order to save it. God’s time line was perfect: a child was born, he grew in wisdom, he was rejected by his own, he was received by those who hoped, he preached a gospel of love, and because of hate the world rejected and crucified him. Jesus took our sins upon himself. To those who believe, he gives the right to become children of God. Does this scenario fit into your picture? If not, ask why? Then re-examine the picture in this modern translation:

*Christ himself was like God in everything, but he did not think that being equal with God was something to be used for his own benefit. But he gave up his place with God and made himself nothing. He was born to be a man and became like a servant. And when he was living as a man, he humbled himself and was fully obedient to God, even when that caused his death — death on a cross. So God raised him to the highest place. God made his name greater than every other name. So that every knee will bow to the name of Jesus — everyone in heaven, on earth. And under the earth, and everyone will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and bring glory to God the Father.— Philippians 2:6-11.*

Humanity did not expect this great act of God, a child born to be Saviour of the world. God’s ways are not our ways, but God’s ways are the best. Jesus is not in a popularity contest. However, like choosing a king for a parade or a nation, you must choose a king in your life. Don’t reject Jesus as so many have. Believe and receive. Amen.