

SERMON

The Rev. Canon Gary van der Meer
St John the Evangelist Anglican Church, Ottawa

4th Sunday after the Epiphany – February 2, 2025
Scriptures: Jeremiah 1:4-10, Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke (4:14-21) 4:21-30

May I speak to you in the name of Creator who loves us. Amen.

We have a Jesus story told in two parts, a sermon in his hometown (Luke 4:14-21) and a reaction to the sermon (4:21-30). The sermon was our gospel reading last Sunday and today we get the reaction.

To remind you or catch you up on what that sermon was, last week we read that Jesus came to his hometown of Nazareth. He was in the synagogue and he stood up to read. He read from the prophet Isaiah. If you were to go the prophet Isaiah in our Old Testament, you would see a different translation from what Jesus is quoting because the New Testament writers would have copied from the Septuagint, that is the Hebrew Scriptures that had been translated into Greek. Did he get to pick the reading himself or was it the assigned reading of the day? That is now the way we choose our readings; in the synagogues it's how they choose their readings as well – they are assigned in advance by the lectionary. That time it was roughly when they started to have that system and so Jesus may well have chosen this scripture.

Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah and I am going to repeat as he has quoted it:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

Jesus then said all we have of what would have been the sermon, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

I don’t know what else would have been around that, but this is the piece that is recorded in the New Testament. Then we get this reaction of hostility. We might try to figure out why they reacted as they did. Was it the sermon itself? Was it that he was a local boy and there is no prophet without honour except in your hometown? Or was it that he insulted them with these references to further scriptures where only certain people were saved but most weren’t.

As for the sermon itself, when he says, “Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing...” I was thinking about what that means. If you look at the whole reading, it could mean he is saying, “I’m the messiah who has come.” And you could imagine when a hometown boy comes home and says, “I am the messiah,” there might be some negative reaction to that. So maybe they are reacting to a claim of who he is.

“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,” could also be a political sermon because the territory is occupied by the Romans. In effect, he could be saying with the prophet Isaiah, “If not now, then when?” When are we going to be liberated from this mess? Some people would be unhappy with a political sermon because they live an uneasy coexistence with their occupiers.

I thought of a third interpretation. This is a personal one. When I was first ordained and first preaching sermons, you study theology and you think, “I want to talk about faith and principles.” But what we need to do is fix the roof. All the practicalities of looking after a community, visiting people in the hospital... you don’t just get to say, “Here are the principles, let’s go fulfil them.” There are other things involved. Jesus is at the beginning of his ministry saying “here’s what this has got to be about” and they are sitting there saying, “ok, well, practically speaking...we have got to look after each other too.”

In any case, they didn’t like it. They commented on who he was related to and then he challenged them and insulted them in a way that said liberation isn’t for everyone.

It looks like his sermon started off well, probably no different from what any other preacher might have done. And then the sermon took a life of its own.

I have to say in terms of timing that we are in the exact same moment. I am going to refer again to the inauguration of the president of the United States, where the bishop in the cathedral preached a sermon and it has taken a life of its own – with still more commentary that is negative. Negative reactions to what the bishop said. In my experience, people who are not part of churches don’t know about sermons. They don’t even think about them. So, for a sermon to enter the public discourse, I found myself especially paying attention.

If you haven’t followed it, I want to repeat a little bit of what the bishop said to President Trump. She said:

“Let me make one final plea, Mr. President. Millions have put their trust in you. As you told the nation yesterday, you have felt the providential hand of a loving God. In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now.”

She then mentioned transgender people and she mentioned migrant workers, and she said, “Have mercy, Mr. President.” “Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger, for we were once strangers in this land.”

As Canadians, our system isn't like that. We don't have an inauguration of the prime minister. That's not how we do things. And yet the tariffs came into effect yesterday [as reported at the time] and the subtext with that – even the overt text – that this is our journey to becoming the 51st state! Maybe this is something we should pay a lot of attention to. And so I have been paying attention to it and thinking about it. Actually, I did something to the liturgy because of it, something I'm not supposed to do.

In the traditional Christian calendar, February 2 is called Candlemas. It is the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, and if you read the rubrics in our official liturgy, these says the feast must take precedence over the regularly scheduled Sunday readings. So I thought about this. The reading for Candlemas is the very same as the First Sunday after Christmas, so you had it on December 29. I figure it's covered. And for churches that did The Naming of Jesus on January 1, it was the same reading then – so it's also covered. And furthermore, what is this Presentation of Christ even about? Why are we doing this in February? In the Pandemic, it was "gotta take those Christmas lights down eventually so you might as well take them down now" because the Pandemic was a dark time. Maybe this observance was more important when people were stuck inside. The original name is The Feast of the Purification of the Virgin. This is that a mother, after giving birth to a child, is impure, and 40 days later must go to the priest to be declared pure again. I thought we could dispense with that. The disputing was so pronounced this past week that I could not let it go.

The House of Representatives in the United States passed a motion resolving that the service at the cathedral was an unacceptable "display of political activism" and "the House of Representatives condemns the Right Reverend Mariann Edgar Budde's distorted message." Mercy is a distorted message.

In response to this, a lot of people came to her defence. She was interviewed in the New Yorker Magazine favourably. Then the conservative side said that this meant she was lobbying. And furthermore, the United States Vice President JD Vance decided to reference scriptures in a public statement. He said about love that Christian love follows a strict order: family first, then neighbour, then community, then country, and only after that, the world beyond. He said this comes from what is called *Ordo Amoris*, the order (law) of love, from St Augustine, a theologian of the 400s. He then added: "And the far left has completely inverted this."

So it's out there in debate. Of course, I was drawn in by this, because I was sure someone would have something to say about it. And it came from one of our great Roman Catholic theologians, Father James Martin, a Jesuit teacher and prolific author. This is what he says to counteract the Vice President:

So Jesus's fundamental message is that *everyone* is your neighbor, and that it is not about helping just your family or those closest to you. It's specifically about helping those who seem different, foreign, other. They are all our "neighbors." In fact, Jesus was often critical of those who would put family first. When Jesus' own family came from Nazareth to Capernaum to "seize" him, he was told that his

mother and brothers were waiting outside a house in which he was preaching. Jesus said, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?"... Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:46-50). For Jesus, ties to the Father were more important than family ties. And responsibilities to family clearly took second place to the demands of discipleship."

When that particular reading comes up, we struggle with it one too. But the dialogue was not done. There's a place on Reddit called, "Ask a conservative." They all agree with Vice President Vance that if you're going to love, you better get your house in order first before you have any love left for anybody else.

I have recognized that I have a personal stake in this. I have just gone down the personal news cycle rabbit hole. And I thought, "Can I live like this for another four years – off of every headline, agonizing and my energy drawn out of me by my feeling of discouragement about it?" Surely, I have a better calling than to live by the news cycle and be discouraged. What am I called to? What are we called to other than living a life of dread. Surely, we are called to more than that.

You heard the Jeremiah Calling Story as our first reading. I expected it would be Isaiah since Jesus quoted Isaiah – he has a calling story too. The Jeremiah calling story is beautiful and compelling. It goes like this:

"Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' But the Lord said to me, 'Do not say, "I am only a boy"; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them."

Are we afraid? Do not be afraid. So the gospel shows Jesus coming to clarity about his calling; his sermon is about that. Jeremiah shows his coming to clarity about his calling. If we believe that God calls each of us, what's your calling? What's my calling? What's our collective calling? If you're called to imitate Jesus, you know it goes right to the end – it goes to the cross, it goes to violent death. If you're called to be like Jeremiah, his book is full of personal anecdotes, insecurity and doubt, but ultimately he is ready to live the consequences of his words and actions. I don't know what your calling is, but collectively I think we are here to figure out for each of us what our calling is. Maybe it is to be imitating Jesus at times to the best of our ability. Maybe it's to be like Jeremiah admitting when we have insecurities and doubts. But maybe you also have a calling that is especially for you. As you think about how life is, it comes clear to you.

I'm thinking ahead to Lent because it's not very far away. In Lent, the stereotype is to give up chocolate or coffee. The idea is to have a discipline that makes you aware and gives you the desire to be more connected to Christ. Have a discipline that helps you to do that. It might be that you give up chocolate and when you feel a longing for chocolate, that's your time to pray about your life. Or it might be that you exchange the chocolate for some reading and some thinking through about what you care about.

I have been thinking about mine. My personal Lent, besides buying Canadian grocery products, is to limit my news and social media time. I'm going to set an amount of time, and when it's done, it's done. I want to be aware of the news but not be overwhelmed by it. I want to seek out other things to read that help me to reflect in a constructive way. And when scripture gets quoted in a public forum, and I'm not sure that's how it should be interpreted – as has happened this week – I want to reread that scripture and make up my own mind.

The Vice President said he was speaking about love and how much there is to go around. Our other reading is that great hymn about love. "If I do not have love, I'm just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Corinthians 1:1). The journey we are on is to become loving people. As you reflect on your life now, in light of the news, and in light of any prayer discipline you are going to take on, maybe the question is, "God, how can I be more loving?"

Amen.