

## Epiphany 3, St Mary Abbots Father Christopher

Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

It is a shame this morning's gospel passage ends where it does, with Jesus rolling up the scroll and sitting down, as all eyes rest on Him, as though He were a boy who has just done His parents proud in the synagogue at His bar mitzvah.

For it goes on to tell us that from having an apparently attentive audience, He goes on to rile them, before they drive Him out of town and to the top of a hill to throw Him off, before He then disappears into their midst. So far, so mysterious.

Why does Jesus wind them up? Well, He does it by saying that no prophet is accepted in his own town – and that while they might have been hoping for healings, as they hear have been performed by Him in Capernaum, He is not sent for them.

What is going on? Why not?

Well, Jesus's message is not a comfortable one, and perhaps they are just too comfortable to be able to hear it. They want the healing without the transformation.

The picture we are given is a very conventional one, and gives us a fascinating insight into the way in which scripture was read in the early synagogues, as well as reminding us of Jesus the Jew. Here He is being given the scroll of Isaiah – a reminder that there was no 'bible' as we know it. And this is the synagogue where Jesus would have gone as a boy every Shabbat – where He indeed no doubt started to read once He reached adolescence.

And yet He drove them into great anger with His message. It might be like one of our long-standing school children here coming back as an adult to read, and from the lectern telling us we're all hypocrites. A shocking scene.

How many people have died because of the interpretation of scripture? It seems rather a dry subject perhaps. And yet in one sense we might see Jesus's whole ministry as being about the interpretation of scripture. He is after all the Word made flesh, and embodies scripture.

But where He is most shocking to His Jewish contemporaries is in His use and interpretation of scripture.

And here He chooses a passage from the prophet Isaiah and reminds them of its potency: '*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to the poor, i.e. not to you bourgeois Nazareth-folk.*

*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.'*

Trevor Huddleston, that great Mirfield monk who was sent to serve in South Africa, and who was to be Desmond Tutu's main influence, once said that he didn't set out to be radical, but was driven to it by his pastoral concern for those he was sent to serve.

This often seems to be the way in the church I think. We may join the church for any number of reasons, but as we seek to embody the example of Christ we realise the logical end of the

scriptures we have been preaching for so long. They come alive and drive us to places we might not have imagined. That is the way the Holy Spirit works.

Oscar Romero is another, perhaps even greater, example. When appointed Archbishop of San Salvador he had a reputation as a conservative cleric, no doubt part of the reason why he was appointed. And then, later that year, in 1977, his friend, the priest Rutilio Grande, a critic of the military government was murdered.

Romero saw with great clarity the imperative of the gospel for the Church to be the Church of the poor, and in his situation that meant that this conservative cleric found himself a principal critic of the government of his country.

Pope John Paul told him that he should prioritise being a focus for unity as archbishop, but he could not stop speaking out. And on 24<sup>th</sup> March 1980, as he finished preaching in a hospital chapel and stepped from the lectern to behind the altar, a red car pulled up outside, a gunman stepped out and shot him in the heart.

And so a gospel reading like that we have heard this morning, while it may have gone right over our head as we thought about what we have to buy in the shops after church, or what we are cooking for lunch, and while it might have sounded totally conventional; while we might have found no particular meaning in it even – it is just Jesus reading a bit of the old testament in a synagogue; That same passage, and others like it, combined with his pastoral care for the poor of San Salvador, led to Oscar Romero giving his life.

You may not be called to give your life for the poor. Or you might.

But as unexpected as it may be, our scriptures can, should and do lead to total transformation of lives. It may take time, but cogitated and digested – and above all, taken seriously - we cannot remain the same.

‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

Amen