

**Great expectations (or Faith for Grown-ups) (Luke 4.22-30)**

*Epiphany 4*

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*God give us rain when we expect sun.  
Give us music when we expect trouble.  
Give us tears when we expect breakfast.  
Give us dreams when we expect a storm.  
Give us a stray dog when we expect congratulations.  
God play with us, turn us sideways and around. Amen*

I've always felt that this delightfully whimsical prayer from Michael Leunig needs to come with a warning: *Be careful what you ask for, you might just get it.* If you've ever prayed this prayer, you'll know how *sideways* turning it can be. I once officiated at the wedding of some friends who insisted on including this prayer as part of their wedding liturgy. 'Are you sure', I cautioned. 'Yes', they said, 'we really love it'. 'Okay... *it's your wedding!!*'

Well, the grand day arrived and we gathered in a beautiful bushland setting for the ceremony. As we ran through final details it all looked perfect... apart from a couple of ominous looking clouds off to the west. No worries, we thought, they're miles away and not even heading in this direction. Half an hour later, just as we got the point of exchanging the rings, a ferocious wind came blasting through the trees and chaos ensued as a deafening thunderstorm (complete with hail) soaked everyone to the bone. When things settled slightly (about 20 minutes later), the drenched couple managed to shout their vows above the noise of the torrent that was raging through the bush chapel, and a very soggy 'knot' was tied. We still laugh about that day... *and that prayer!!*

I share this because today's sermon is all about expectations and how troublesome they can be. The gospel reading you've just heard continues on from where it left off last Sunday. It's what happened in the wake of Jesus's preaching in his old synagogue. Remember, he'd returned to his home community in Nazareth proclaiming that God's vision of justice for the poor and oppressed was being fulfilled in their time. It was a big day, and it had a big impact. *'All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth'*, Luke says (22). But then, for some reason, things turn sour. One minute they're applauding him enthusiastically; ten minutes later they're trying to hurl him off a cliff!! So, what happened here? Was it a case of mutual offence giving, as it seems in the text, or is there more to it?

It all seems to start going wrong when the people ask (22): *'Isn't this man Joseph's son?'* Some interpret this as a bit of a put down, as in, isn't he just a local kid, what makes him think he's so special? But to point out that he's a local boy isn't to denigrate Jesus, the commentators suggest, it's to obligate him. We miss the subtlety of this, but Jesus understands full well that by referring to him as 'Joseph's son' the crowd is expecting preferential treatment for his own family and village (see Parsons 2015.82). Hence, his retort (23): *'Doubtless you will quote to me the proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!"'* 'Cure yourself' - attend to your immediate obligations, that's what the proverb implies in this context; confine your ministrations to us; stop getting tied up with others.

This expectation clearly upsets Jesus, and he challenges it in no uncertain terms. Why? Well, because it's totally inconsistent with the message he's just proclaimed. He has just announced 'the year the Lord's favour' (19), the Jubilee, breaking in: 'Today'. It signalled a new start for everyone, God's favour for all. That's who Jesus stands with (everyone),

which means he is beholden to no one – not his earthly family, not his home town, not you, not me. Jesus stood in the tradition of the prophets of old, (hence his quoting of Isaiah), and true prophets, by nature of their vocation, were not ruled by the expectations and self-interests of their home community. The example of two of the greatest prophets reaching beyond religious and tribal boundaries, served to reinforce Jesus' point. Elijah cared for a poor gentile widow from Zarephath in Sidon. Elisha healed Naaman, a Syrian official, another outsider. In each case, God defied the Israelite expectation that they and they alone would receive attention. That's the message the prophets proclaimed, that's the way they lived. This upset their local communities, which is why, as Jesus says, no prophet is accepted in their hometown (24). He's signalling that he will not dance to the tune of their expectations, and they don't like it.

In truth, none of us really do. Let's be honest, we'd prefer a god who can be appropriated and controlled, a god who jumps especially high at our command. There's no question that Christ cares for these people in Nazareth; he cares for us. It's good news! The problem we can struggle with is that God also cares *for them* - the suspect ones!! That God's grace is extended to everyone – even our enemies. To my fragile ego, that doesn't always sound like good news, but if I can't accept it, I *will* be disappointed, just as the people in Nazareth were. *'When they heard this', Luke writes, 'all in the synagogue were filled with rage'. ('How dare you defy the expectations of your home town.')* And, *'they got up, and drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill... so they might hurl him off the cliff'* (29). As it turns out, it wasn't lethal for Jesus; somehow, he managed to walk through their midst. Nevertheless, it was a sobering taste of what lay ahead.

Well, for me, all this helps make sense of the dynamics of this passage, the sudden reversal in Jesus' relationship with his community and kin. Even so, as a preacher I find myself asking, why he made such a big deal of this? Why be so deliberately provocative? Could he have been more diplomatic, a tad gentler with their expectations? You'd hardly call this pastoral sensitivity!

As I've reflected on this, two things strike me. As far as Jesus is concerned, it's as if he knew he *had* to draw a line here, to be clear from the start. Having recently returned from his wilderness testing, he knows how tempting it is to want to please the crowd, to play for their applause. He also knows that to compromise on this, is to compromise on everything. If that happens, everyone will lose. He must take a stand for this new reality, this dream and its fulfilment, and so he does.

And, despite appearances, there's a gift in this for *the people* as well. For their reaction reveals the shadow-side of their initial adulation and admiration. When all was to their liking, their 'thinking well' of Christ looked great, looked like the beginnings of genuine faith. But when they didn't get their way, when he challenged their tribal mentality, their claim to specialness and superiority, they turned on him. Jesus is pushing these people to grow, to expand their image of God, to move beyond self-seeking expectations and placing conditions on God. He wants them to learn generous trust. If our faith is to develop, that's what needs to happen. We must get past immature devotionism dependent on always feeling good and getting what we think we want. This can be painful and humbling, which is why people can give up on and reject Christ.

Jesus *is* provoking his townsfolk and doing it, I suggest, for good reason. He's seen a shadow in their 'speaking well' of him, an expectation

that if unchecked will undermine their capacity to participate in God's generous way of being with the world. And isn't that shadow long in our world today - people of 'faith' fighting to secure their own place at the expense of others, thinking themselves uniquely deserving of God. Jesus is giving his home community a chance to see this shadow, to get over themselves.

At the end of this section, it's not looking promising. They appear hell-bent on destroying him. Amazingly, he passes through their midst – his 'hour' (to use a Johannine term) has not yet come. It will; the small-minded, tight-hearted ones will make sure of that. In meantime, what did this final action of calmly passing-through-their-midst achieve? Were some struck by his authority, did they suddenly (or slowly) see what was really operative here – their pride and limiting expectations? Or did they continue to blame him for disappointing them, and remain self-righteously offended?

We're not told, which leaves us to think about our expectations, and where and how they might be getting in the way. Where are you feeling disappointed or provoked?? When God gives you rain when you expect sun... tears when you expect breakfast... a stray dog when you expect congratulations, how do you react? If, like me, you note in yourself the disposition to self-pity or resentment, then rejoice, my friends, for you've a just received an opportunity to exercise humility and grow in trust. And, if that's where you are right now, struggling to learn humility and grow in trust, may God give you music when you expect trouble, and dreams when you expect a storm.

### **References**

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