

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Sexagesima Sunday
January 31, 2016

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The lectionary divides the flow of dramatic events in Saint Luke's Chapter Four. Perhaps Holy Mother Church does not want you standing for such a long gospel! But when we take the passage *as a whole* we see the great turn of events. It goes from warm acceptance of the local-boy-made-good to an angry mob wanting to kill Him. We want to know what made these Sunday-go-to-church people so angry so quickly.

First-century Israel was filled with hatred. There was hatred for the Romans, hatred against the tax system, and hatred against the Gentile neighbors. Hatred was the fuel that stoked the engine of national identity. And some things never change! In the Middle East today, in Northern Ireland, and sometimes much closer to home, hatred and revenge can become inbred and part of the people's identity. Then comes along the Incarnate Son of God and His Gospel, preaching love, comfort, and meekness, as the real power in life. People are faced with the fact it isn't very easy to change their ways.

When anybody questioned the Lord's authority He did not mince His words in reply. Jesus reminded the Jews their own history recorded the prophet Elijah as bringing salvation not to the widows of Israel but to one in outcast Sidon. The prophet Elisha is not recorded as having healed any lepers in Israel (although doubtless there were many). But in a famous incident Elisha healed a leper named Naaman who was from the hated Syria. We may be hazy on where they keep Sidon, but we know about Syria because it is in the headlines daily in our newspapers. The venom of persistent national/religious hatred amazes us, protected as we are by two vast oceans. But it is obvious the people in 1st Century Nazareth were having their noses rubbed in their own prejudices. And to add insult to injury this was not being done by a *visiting* authority. Jesus was a local, whose recognized credentials only included carpentry! What was happening was the Voice of God, as It always does, was tampering with people's lives. It brings into the spotlight how we regard our neighbors and treat each other. When the message of the Gospel gets close like that, we all feel the pinch.

It is a sad fact that children want their parents to stay together under intolerable circumstances, rather than divorce. (This is often true even if the family staying

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together involves constant rancor, tension, and danger to the children themselves.) Prisoners liberated from Auschwitz and the Singapore jail in 1945 were not overwhelmed with joy. Being free was scary. If an environment is ordered, even *miserably* ordered, change is resisted. Something like that faced Jesus in the Nazareth synagogue. Hatred and prejudice were set and established in that synagogue, just like they can be in the Church, and we can all too easily assume that because life is ordered that way so too is the Gospel.

Fortunately the gift of *prophecy* never deserts the Church. When we are baptized we “put on Christ” (to use St Paul’s memorable phrase.) And Christ is prophet as well as priest and king. So the Christian believer is the one who speaks the truth and who recognizes the truth when he hears it, no matter how inconvenient, unattractive, or costly may be the acknowledgment of it. You remember the Lord’s teaching that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. And Chesterton’s quip was that ever since, science has been trying to breed smaller camels and technology has tried to make larger needles! The Church’s message is not conventional wisdom. It cannot be refashioned by science and industry. *It is the Lord’s message*. It sets the world on its head as He did, denying what the world affirms and affirming what the world chooses to deny. Scripture says not all are prophets. But prophecy should either be ordinary Christian speech or it should resonate in our hearts. It is sad that this kind of witness is hard to come by and very hard to deliver because the price seems too high. Such reticence speaks volumes about the lack of Christian conviction.

Whatever happened in Nazareth that day, we should see the tragedy in it not simply as *their* problem but as symptomatic of our own. We often seek to destroy or stifle what is best for our own spiritual growth. When we do that *we* are the losers. We are losers every time we try to *make* Christ something He is not, or something less than Who He is. In point of fact we cannot *make* Him anything. Christians are people who have made a choice between Jesus and our prior ideas. We know we cannot hang on to both. *And we have chosen the Lord*.