**Luke 4.21-30**Jeremiah 1.4-10*2nd February 2025*

##  Sermons – to comfort and to challenge?

*Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray to our hearts and minds. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

*Preaching with a View* has always been considered a vital part of the Settlement Process in our tradition. Sometimes it’s even proceeded with a *Preaching with a Squint.* These are occasions when a prospective minister, one who might be up to fill the Vacancy, takes a service and preaches what they hope is the best sermon in their file. It’s often followed by a friendly Question and Answer time in the church hall afterwards. At least that’s what the congregation call it, whereas my colleagues and I sometimes refer to it as the *Roast Preacher session!* Of course, all of this in the Baptist and URC way of doing things that eventually leads up to a Church Meeting pastorate election. Other traditions look with mild bemusement on this, especially if their way of going about things means the congregation will never actually have met their new vicar or priest before the Induction Service. I sometimes wonder what any church would have made of Jesus *Preaching with a View*. I may be wrong, but I suspect, because of the intensity of his challenge, there would have been little chance of him getting passed the stage of *Preaching with a Squint*. At least that’s how it comes across in today’s gospel from Luke 4. It’s part two and a continuation from last Sunday’s account of our Lord back home at Nazareth as the visiting preacher in their Synagogue.

Initially his hearers warmed to him, a village boy come home. Yet their positive reception is merely fleeting and so, as the passage proceeds, Luke says they turned more and more hostile. Surely, it’s utterly remarkable and hauntingly prophetic, that they took such offense at Jesus’ message of inclusivity and the idea that God’s love knows no boundaries, so much so that they closed down the challenge with violence. It’s the saddest trajectory of any conflict of views when instead of talking it through we resort to physical oppression to shut it down. No, Jesus was not well received that day, and I doubt he was ever given his preaching fee!

Well, there is no doubt that ideas about preaching, and preachers bind our two readings together this morning.

From the Jewish Scriptures we read of the commissioning of Jeremiah to be a prophet. That unwelcome call came about 627BC at a low ebb in the nation’s story. Four hundred years before, with King David’s inspiration breathing confidence into ancient Israel, so many felt positive. All these centuries later with corruption rampant and leadership absent, so many felt negative. So, not a great time to be thrust by God into preaching a message of challenge with sermons calling for change. Jeremiah was simply not up for it. He pleaded his youth and inexperience only to be reassured by God that he’d been chosen whilst in his mother’s womb and that God’s enabling presence would brush his lips and give him a voice.

Rather like the reluctance a Speaker of the House of Commons is meant to show in being dragged to their chair on the first day of a new Parliament, so Jeremiah takes up his calling with a heavy heart, overwhelmed by his task and underwhelmed by his confidence to meet it.

The old adage says sermons are best delivered when they *disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed.* Yet maybe both Jeremiah’s and Jesus’ sermons, always delivered with an eye to the injustice the poor received at the hands of the rich and powerful, became a call to alms that dangerously upset the status quo. Not many might have been tempted to greet them at the door afterwards saying *nice sermon vicar.* Their words pierced consciences and ruffled feathers of smug self-contentment.

Over Christmas we once again watched the rather bizarre film *Cold Comfort Farm –* well actually, truth to tell, it verges on the bonkers! It’s always a delight, however, to enter once more into the strange world of Stella Gibbon’s novel which I first read at school, the world of the Starkadder family. I smiled watching the wonderful Ian McKellen play Amos Starkadder, a devout member of the Quivering Brethren church. During the film he receives what he considers to be God’s call to buy, of all things, a Ford van and go up and down the country *a preaching.* Perhaps they should show the film at theological colleges and ask the ordinands what they make of preacher Amos Starkadder and his thunderous sermons to his Quivering Brethren congregation.

But the question is, what do we make of any preacher because today’s passages are essentially not just about those who preach, be they Jeremiah or Jesus, but of those who listen. It’s a question not just for the Nazareth congregation but for us today.

Now, one of the most encouraging, even comforting aspects of preaching is the surprise that what you think you’ve said is not necessarily what the congregation hears. And whilst that can sometimes mystify the one who stands in a pulpit, more often it comes as a blessing that somewhere between the time the words leave a preacher’s mouth and settle into a member of the congregation’s heart, God seems to have entered into that journey and relationship between pulpit and pew.

Yet it seems as if that relationship broke down in the Nazareth sermon. Something goes badly wrong. What, I wonder, made the listening so difficult when Jesus preached?

It surely couldn’t have been the subject matter because wasn’t Jesus preaching good news for the poor, to the very people at the centre of his mother’s song, *The Magnificat*.

It surely couldn’t have been the preacher, for doesn’t Luke tell us they started off being so proud of him, even warmed by his words. After all, despite the gossip surrounding his untimely birth, he was still one of them, one of their own.

No, Luke hints that what made their reception so hostile was the idea Jesus proposes that his message and God’s love was being willingly accepted in neighbouring communities outside of Israel. And this, Luke suggests, was a much bigger picture of God than was usually presented in the sermons and teachings in that local faith community. The God who is found outside of MY experience, MY boundaries and MY understanding.

I recall an uncomfortable moment at a neighbour’s drinks party one Christmas many years ago. I was chatting with a Christian couple whose tradition, so it turned out, was different to mine. As we tucked into the cheese and pineapple on sticks, they asked what I, as a Minister of the Church believed about gay rights and women in ministry. Initially they seemed genuinely interested in my views, but when I told them I was in favour of both, I realised that any further dialogue between us had vanished, and for the next fifteen minutes they spoke, without drawing breath, about why I, and my fellow deviant clergy, were so very wrong in our views. I was delighted when our kind host intervened and escorted me towards the Volo vents!

Listening is a precious gift. Listening to each other. Listening to God. And one question to at least ask about today’s gospel reading is *Did the congregation really listen to Jesus’ sermon?* Or did their strongly held views feel so threatened that day that Jesus’ words were tossed back, like a letter unopened and addressed *return to sender*?

So, I want to close this morning by saying two things about religion, one negative and one, I hope, positive.

Our gospel reading today is so rich in its message, so deep in its depiction of the way life so often is. The response of religious people listening to a sermon is violence. It must be one of the saddest of the Jesus’ stories. People of faith, in a religious building, during a service of worship, are so challenged by the sermon which floated the idea that God’s love and presence could be experienced by people outside of their religious system, that they respond violently to the preacher. It’s a tragedy and today we read this story recognising that since these words were first penned, they have been numerous moments in the history of the Christian Church when we too have acted with violence towards people we have de-humanised, because of supposed differences between us.

But thank God, there is the other side of the coin. It comes in the form of a story from Northern Ireland just before the Good Friday Agreement as the wonderful Corrymeela Community worked to bring Protestants and Catholics together. Professor Scott Appleby was visiting the Province from Notre Dame University in the USA, he was a respected author on Conflict Transformation and on his last day he caught a cab back to the airport ready to fly home. He describes it as the best part of his trip because he says, in his naivety he asked the cabby, who was from the Protestant Shankill Road, if he’d ever been tempted to become a paramilitary. *No,* he said, *but my brother is and carries a gun*. *Well, why don’t you?* asked Professor Appleby. The cabby replied, *When I was young my mother sent me to*[*Corrymeela.*](http://corrymeela.org/)*I made friends with Catholics. And after that, it didn’t seem to make sense to fight them.*

Instead of de-humanising others because of the so-called differences between them, through listening and ‘being with’ others, the cabby has chosen peace instead of violence.

And that is, in itself, a great sermon worth listening to.

May we be open to hear God’s voice in all it’s comfort and in all its challenge, today and always. Amen.

 *Ian Green, Amersham, 31st January 2025*