

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY
31 January 2022

**Authentic prayer is invariably
a matter of both
emptying the mind and filling the heart,
and often one follows the other.**

—Richard Rohr



*Take a few moments to begin the emptying process.
Become silent and still. Inhale and exhale as you lay aside any distractions.
Be here. Now...*

Invitation to Prayer—Psalm 71: 1, 5–6

In you, O Sacred Love, I take refuge;
do not let me down.
For you are my only hope,
my trust, from my earliest days.
I have leaned upon you since my birth;
it was you who took me from my mother's womb.
Therefore I will praise you continually.

Prayer

Keeper of our swirling earth:
all too soon the morning sun
is beginning its seasonal retreat
and we now awaken to grey, filtered light.
At times, it can be hard to praise you continually,
to uphold a sunny outlook or even trust
amidst the dim news and lack of assurances.

May your Spirit welcome me into prayer
just as I am—
my praise as well as my complaint.
By your acceptance and love,
may I be uplifted in spirit
and strengthened in faith.
For though the future is always unknown,
your love holds me in every circumstance.
Praise be to you. Amen

ENCOUNTERING THE LIVING WORD

Today's reading picks up after Jesus has read a passage from the Prophet Isaiah in his hometown synagogue. Woven into today's reading are reflective questions. When you come to an italicised question, you are invited to pause and respond before continuing with the reading. There is no right or wrong response. Instead, the reflective questions are a way to help you attend to what is happening for you. They facilitate conversation between yourself and the Spirit in scripture.

Open the ear of my heart, O God,
that I might hear the word you have for me this day.
Amen

Scripture Reading—Luke 4:21–30

Then Jesus began to say to the congregation in the synagogue, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"

You are part of the hometown congregation. What do you say about Jesus to your neighbour?

Jesus said to the congregation, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'"

And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was

a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."

Jesus reminds us that prophets reveal how God acts beyond expected people and places. What question might you ask of Jesus?

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove Jesus out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Jesus looks at you as he passes through the rage-filled crowd. What do you see in his eyes? What might he be communicating to you?

Reflection on the Word

*What, if anything, was revealed during the scripture reading? What stays with you?
You may want to pause for a time contemplation
before reading the written reflection.*

Reflection on Luke 4:21–30

Rev. Christine Gilbert for St. Andrew's Uniting Church

The situation at the synagogue in Nazareth is heating up since last week's scene. Jesus has returned to his hometown after a forty-day retreat in the wilderness and he is launching his public ministry with a preaching tour through the region of Galilee. How will people respond?

Well, the initial reaction seems to be one of approval. The people take pride in Jesus' being one of their own—a Nazarene through and through. They remember him running around with the other children in the neighbourhood, sweeping sawdust in Joseph's shop, and attending Hebrew school at the synagogue.

Interestingly, despite the accolades and warm reception, Jesus charges forth with strong if not confronting words. "No doubt you will say to me, 'Do here in your hometown what we've heard you did at Capernaum.' ...But I say a prophet is never accepted in their hometown."

Then, Jesus rubs salt in the wound by reminding them of times when God worked through prophets to sustain and heal people who would ordinarily be considered beyond the scope of gracious action or concern—the widow of Sidon and Naaman of Syria.

Elijah was sent by God to the widow of Sidon during a six-year drought. Sidon was once condemned by the prophets for its lack of hospitality. But now, as per his instruction from God, Elijah rocks up at the widow's home and asks for a cup of water which she is happy to provide. When he asks for a roll of bread to go with it, the widow informs him she is down to her last bit of flour and oil. In fact, she was about to prepare bread for herself and her son before lying down to die.

Elijah insists the widow make the bread for him and promises the flour and oil will not run out before the drought ends. Trusting the prophet's words, she feeds Elijah the bread and finds that indeed the flour and oil are continually restored. They have all they need.

In Elisha's day, Naaman was a commander in the army of Aram—a nation who fought against Israel on numerous occasions. Naaman suffered from leprosy and, after hearing about Elisha from one of the Israelite women who had been taken captive by his army, he sends for Elisha to come heal him. Long story short, Elisha provides instructions to Naaman who, after cleansing himself in the river, is restored to health.

The widow of Sidon and Naaman of Syria were "outsiders," that is, not part of the tribe. They were judged to be beyond the reach and undeserving of grace, and yet, they were recipients of God's merciful care.

By alluding to these stories, Jesus seeks to throw open once again the doors of God's love. From the familiar perch of his hometown, Jesus reminds us that God's activity refuses to be domesticated or limited by our expectations. It seems that growing up into Christ requires a constant prising open of our hearts and minds—a steady reminder that God and God's love are well beyond our control and imagination!

This word may be a helpful re-directive to us as we seek to align ourselves as individuals and as a church with the love of God. One of the lectionary readings for this week is the thirteenth chapter of Paul's letter to the Corinthian church. Sometimes known as "the love chapter" it includes these verses:

*When I was a child, I spoke like a child,
I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child;
when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.
For now we see in a mirror, dimly,
but then we will see face to face.
Now I know only in part;
then I will know fully,
even as I have been fully known.*

Maturation in the Christian life always leads to an expansion of our hearts and minds. The scope of our love is forever being widened and our capacity to be accepting, generous and self-giving increases. The trajectory of the Christian journey is one of universality or a greater ability to sense Christ in and through all and a growing desire to respond accordingly.

In the words of Franciscan priest and theologian Richard Rohr, "Once we know that the entire physical world around us, all of creation, is both the hiding place and the revelation place for God, this world becomes home, safe, enchanted, offering grace to any who look deeply." (from *The Universal Christ*)

Unfortunately, rather than being good news for the congregation, the people react with aggression and try to throw Jesus off a cliff. Similarly, when the immature, childish parts of ourselves are ignited, jealousy, pettiness, self-concern and uglification of every sort erupt in our hearts and seep into our actions.

Instead of dwelling in guilt over these human realities, they might serve as indicators for us, a symptom that we are out-of-tune with God's all-encompassing love. Like the hostility of the congregation that day in the synagogue, the resentment and bitterness we experience from time to time might suggest we have tried to confine the loving work of God to our limited perspective.

But Jesus passes through the resistance and hostility of the crowd, untouched and unaffected that day. It occurs to me this curious detail at the end of the scene can be an encouragement for us as we bumble along.

In the midst of our immaturity, the Spirit of Christ remains resilient and strong. Flowing through us despite our limitations and faltering, Christ's Spirit is always on the way to enact healing, love and grace in our world. We are invited to step out of the herd mentality—the tendency to divide and form identity in over-and-against terms, the temptation to hold dualisms and prejudices of every sort—and follow Christ into places of deepening, inclusive love and being. May God grant us the courage to do so.

My love colours outside the lines by Gordon Light

*My love colours outside the lines,
Exploring paths that few could ever find;
And takes me into places where I've never been before,
And opens doors to worlds outside the lines.*

*My Lord colours outside the lines,
Turns wounds to blessings, water into wine;
And takes me into places where I've never been before
And opens doors to worlds outside the lines.*

Refrain:

*We'll never walk on water
if we're not prepared to drown,
Body and soul need a soaking from time to time.
And we'll never move the gravestones
if we're not prepared to die,
And realize there are worlds outside the lines.*

*My soul longs to colour outside the lines,
Tear back the curtains, sun, come in and shine;
I want to walk beyond the boundaries
where I've never been before,
Throw open doors to worlds outside the lines.*

*My soul longs to colour outside the lines,
Tear back the curtains, sun, come in and shine;
I want to walk beyond the boundaries
where I've never been before,
Throw open doors to worlds outside the lines.*

You can listen to the song in various places on the internet. Here is one by a group who recorded an album of contemporary Christian hymns:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtmMb5ByX4Y>

Or you might enjoy this version which was put together by a virtual pandemic choir and includes beautiful images:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTKKiv2QjFs>

RESPONDING WITH OUR LIVES

Prayers of the People—from *Australian Prayers* by Bruce Prewer

God of Jesus, God of us all, only true and everlasting friend, inspire us to pray and act with the compassion of Jesus Christ.

At this moment there are people who hunger for food, for a crust of bread, a piece of fish, or even the scraps in our garbage bins. Please feed them.

Holy friend, sift our prayers and turn our hopes into deeds.

There are some people who hunger for liberty to go as they please, to stay on at home or visit friends, to worship without fear, to vote for whoever they please, to see the end of police, compounds and prisons, to be reunited with those they love. Please give them liberty.

Holy friend, sift our prayers and turn our hopes into deeds.

And there are some who hunger to be useful, to share what wisdom they have learnt from life, to listen to a neighbour's worries, to work beside a weary friend, to be of use to their family, country or church—to be of use to you. But bad health, or shyness and timidity, or the frailty of old age, or sorrow over old sins holds them back. Please show them how they can be useful.

Holy friend, sift our prayers and turn our hopes into deeds.

Bread of life, there are some who are spirituality hungry, who yearn for some faith and passion, who search for your meaning, who look for someone they can trust and hunger for something worth worshipping. Please satisfy their hunger with the bread of life.

Holy friend, sift our prayers and turn our hopes into deeds.

And to you, bountiful God, Father and Provider, Christ and Saviour, Holy Spirit and Friend, be honour and glory, worship and praise, from now to eternity.

Disciples' Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen

Blessing

*This blessing comes from the Christian community in Tonga
through a World Council of Churches resource.
Our hearts and minds remain with them at this time.*

Go with the strength you have.

Go simply

lightly

gently

in search of Love.

And the Spirit go with you.

Amen