

I have an uneasy feeling that if Jesus came among us today, challenging our church to embody God's free grace for all types of people, we might find it expedient to edge him out? (You will notice I say "edge" not "throw" because these days we're too "nice" to use physical thuggery. Nice people are usually more subtle in their rejections).

Jesus was not a popular success at Nazareth. Doing the right thing led him to be pushed to the edge of a cliff by the good people of the church. True godliness, does not directly lead to prosperity and praise. In fact, *"Woe unto you when all people speak well of you."*

Here in Australia, in spite of our myth of **"mateship"** and an egalitarian **"fair go for all,"** the faithful church, or faithful minister, might not be marked by booming congregations and community admiration any more than Jesus and his disciples were.

Inclusive love, when it moves beyond mere religious sentiment into nitty gritty truth and action, remains a shocking scandal. It will certainly offend some. Those who once spoke well of us, can quickly turn on us and reject us when the truth of Christ starts to bite.

To love and follow Jesus is a risky way to go. Yet it is the only way that leads to abundant life and light and holy joy. So let's choose it again today, or perhaps for the first time, as we launch into a new year of action, service and witness for God from our home base here at St John's.

**Amen!! Thanks be to God!!**

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## *A Message from Mark!* **A Risky Way to Go!**

**31 January 2010 - Epiphany 4**  
**Scripture: Luke 4:21-30**

*When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They went for Jesus, to eject him from their town. They hustled him to the brow of the hill, on which the town was built, in order to hurl him off the cliff. Luke 4: 28-29*

There is a persistent furphy [in Aus lingo "furphy" = rumour, or false story] doing the rounds of many religious people. It says that if we do the right thing by God, God will help us become successful and popular.

It's extremely difficult to eradicate this furphy, this false expectation. Christians should know better. Yet it persists. At the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus was rejected and threatened with murder, by being thrown from a cliff top. Why? Why was Jesus rejected by his own people, in his home town, where he had been raised since a child? Why did they get angry enough to want to kill him?

Among the explanations given, the most common is that good citizens of Nazareth were angry because Jesus quoted a prophecy from Isaiah and then applied it to himself. They were appalled by his apparent claim to be God's Messiah. To them this was a disgusting blasphemy.

I don't buy this explanation. If we look again at the Gospel passage we see that after Jesus made his announcement, *Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing*, they were all excited and very proud of him.

We read: *All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth; They said: "Isn't this our Joseph's son?"*

At this stage in the episode, Jesus was popular. Yet a few minutes later he was rejected and outcaste. What made the difference? Looking carefully at the text, we discover that Jesus went on to talk about God's grace towards despised Gentiles, those non-Jews who were regarded as unclean and hardly human; despised and unfit for the company of righteous Jews.

(Uncomfortably close to how many European colonists treated the indigenous people of this continent. Instead of the old English fox hunts, they indulged in what they called "boong" hunts.)

Jesus spoke of the legendary prophet Elijah, who in a time of famine didn't precipitate a food miracle for Jews, but did so for an alien widow in the Phoenician province of Sidon. Jesus drove home his message by also reminding them of the case of the prophet Elisha, who although there were many lepers in Israel, was used by God to heal a leper called Naaman; a man from hated Syria.

That did it. Their good mood turned foul. Praise turned to scorn and anger. I quote: *When they heard this, all those who were in the synagogue became furious, and they went for Jesus.* (Not so unusual. As recently as the 1970's some church ministers were rejected and practically "run out" of country towns if they sided with aborigines.)

This was the crunch. It appears that it was Jesus' declaration that God loved Gentiles as much as he loved Jews, that enraged the people of his home town.

They had no time for this inclusive message, it disgusted and infuriated them. What had seemed a kindly congregation, basking in the glory of one of their own making good, turned into a wild mob bent on lynching this upstart who dared to challenge the doctrine of God's favouritism towards the Jews. You may say: *"Hold on a moment. Jesus' mission was to the Jews, wasn't it? He didn't go to the pagans, the Gentiles?"*

Well that's partly true. He didn't go to Greece and preach, or to Egypt or Rome. He stayed in his own familiar territory, smaller than the State of Tasmania. Yet his mission remained a universal, inclusive one, and he proved this by including in his outreach the hated Roman and the mongrel Samaritan, the Greek and Phoenician. As well as this, he made sure he included all those disgraced Jews, the outsiders who were no longer welcomed at the synagogue.

This inclusiveness even shaped the selection of the disciples. Think about it. Didn't he choose some disciples with Greek names like Philip and Andrew? What good, pious Jew would give his sons Greek names? And what was Matthew, a tax pimp for the Roman occupation force, doing among the Christ's disciples?

Jesus refused to classify people into pure or impure, righteous and unrighteous, worthy churchgoers and the unworthy outsiders, Israelites and pagan Gentiles, God's people and the unwashed mob. His love was radically inclusive.

And that's what appears to have *"got up the noses"* of his fellow citizens in Nazareth. (It is significant that it's Luke who tells this story. Among the Gospel writers it is Luke who especially emphasises the inclusive mission. In common with Paul, that once-uptight Jewish bigot who was rocked to his foundations and converted to Jesus and his ways, Luke delights in the inclusive love of God.)

God's grace in Christ Jesus didn't discriminate, so that led to rejection, even by those kindly hometown people with whom Jesus had knocked about and grown up in Nazareth.

Our faith and service and worship must be always truly catholic; that is, universally inclusive, or it is not Christianity. Yet we tend to slip into the exclusive mode and hardly notice it. Our churchy language, rituals and liturgies (which we treasure) can be just the thing to keep all that we do in *'code'*, so that people who are not part of us can't fully and freely participate. That's partly why we've committed to a more regular Young Families Service this year - to try and be more genuinely *'user friendly'* on Sundays at 4.30 pm.