

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

My sister Liz and I are very close. That she is a religious sister and I am a priest would be a good reason for our closeness. We are told that we share a lot of mannerisms and we are sometimes asked if we are twins. My sister has admitted that there was a time when she was not so pleased that I was her younger brother. She had enjoyed being the youngest in our family for some four and a half years. But when I came along everyone made such a fuss about me that she felt very left out. I'm sure that mum and dad did all they could to assure her that she was still as important as she was before I came, but in her eyes the spotlight had moved from her to me.

I think something of that is happening in today's gospel. The people who thought that they were at the centre of God's attention, chosen by him and loved by him in a unique way were now being asked to see a bigger picture. How else can you explain the shift that at one moment the people of Nazareth accept Jesus and then reject him?

What comes through in Luke's gospel is that Jesus made it very clear that his mission as God's prophet was far beyond the little town of Nazareth. Jesus reminds the people of two prophets from the Hebrew Scriptures who were called to minister to people beyond Israel. Elijah was sent to a widow in the coastal town of Zerepath, to

the north west of Israel. This gentile woman accepted his word as a prophet of God and gave the last of her food to him. Elisha was sent to heal the leper Naaman from Syria. We are told that when the people of Nazareth heard what Jesus said they became enraged. They sprang to their feet and hustled Jesus out of the synagogue and attempted to stone him to death by throwing him off the cliff on the edge of the town.

What seemed to upset the people of Nazareth was that Jesus was not only declaring himself to be a prophet, but that he was claiming to be a prophet sent by God to all people, no matter what their religious background might be. Jesus was challenging his own people to look beyond their safe little world and to imagine that God was at work far beyond what they knew. Jesus was challenging his people to believe that God's salvation was for all people and that Jesus would reach out to embrace them in ways that were foreign to them. And perhaps the hardest thing for them to accept was that this was not a new way for God to act. It was part of their tradition. It was already in their scriptures that God could act like this.

Is this the challenge that we too need to hear? We have come a long way from thinking that the only people in the world who could be saved were baptised Catholics. Our prejudices have gradually been broken down as we

have come to know people of faith from other Christian Churches. Some of us have prayed with them and studied the Scriptures with them. Pope Francis continues to lead by example. It was not so long ago that he travelled to Sweden to take part in the 500th celebration of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. He used it as an opportunity to thank God for the way that Lutherans and Catholics have come to respect and understand each other through 50 years of dialogue.

On Sunday next we are invited to take part in a Prayer Walk with Christians of other denominations. We will gather at Our Lady of Mercy just before 7.00pm, and after listening to Jesus sending out the 72 disciples, we will be invited to walk around the town in the company of one or two others for thirty minutes, stopping at places where we might pray for the people associated with that place. We will come back to the church to conclude our time of prayer and share some supper. It is not something that I have done before, but it seems as if it could to a good way to express the belief that we are all God's family, concerned for the community in which we live.

We are all called to look beyond those things with which we are comfortable. We are all called to be open to where God may be at work in our world. One way to allow that to happen is to believe that God shares the

gifts of his Spirit very widely. St. Paul speaks again today about the gifts of the Spirit in his letter to the Corinthians. He urges us to seek first the gift that will endure: the gift of God's love. Many couples choose this reading for their wedding. Perhaps they see it as an examination of conscience to test the depth of their love for one another. It can help us all to reflect upon the cost of loving another person. But what I think we also need to hear is that this is a description of the kind of love that God has for us. It is only when we know something of the depth of the love that God has for us that we can freely share God's gift of love with others.

We are also called to be open to that gift of love from God in whatever way God may choose to give it to us. God is teaching us how to love each time when we respond to the needs of a stranger. God is opening our hearts to his love each time we make room for others in our lives. God is gifting us with his Spirit of love each time we forgive the ones who have hurt us. Another Francis taught us this when he gave us his prayer for peace. The Prayer of St Francis concludes: Make me a channel of your peace. For it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, in giving of ourselves that we receive, and in dying that we're born to eternal life.