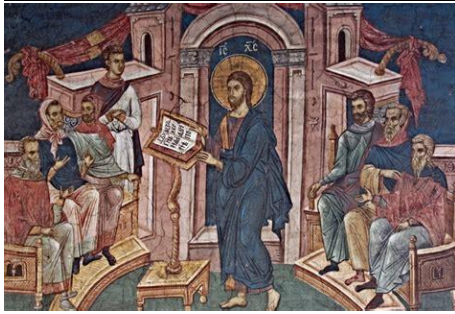
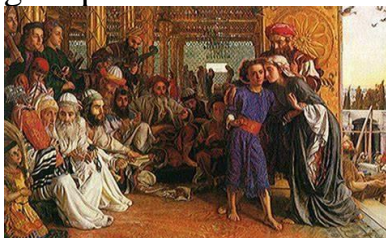


SERMON, ZOOM – 23 OCTOBER 2022 – LUKE 4.16-24



In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

You do wonder what the good folk of Nazareth made of Jesus. He was now aged 30, so did anyone remember the rumours, the gossip, that had flowed round the town 30 years earlier? Was Mary always the unmarried mother, the woman who had had to marry Joseph quickly? Did anyone remember, or believe, the story that had gone round about an angelic messenger? Or had the past been forgotten – they remembered Joseph the carpenter, a good chap, shame he's been dead for, what 15 years now. Jesus was a good carpenter too – perhaps some of his brothers were also in the family firm – and you can't imagine the firm had anything other than a good reputation. No doubt there had been family celebrations – brothers and sisters getting married, Mary probably had grandchildren – perhaps some people wondered why Jesus had never married. The single person never has it easy in Society – perhaps there had been gossip and rumour about him.



We assume the family were part of the religious life of the town. 18 years ago Jesus had stunned everyone when he went to Jerusalem for his coming of age, and stayed behind to talk to the priests. Was the teenage Jesus the sort of lad who studied, would go far – but why hadn't he? Had the rabbi in Nazareth tried to get him to go back to Jerusalem, to study, to progress in his faith – or did the rabbi know there wasn't anything that he could be taught. Was it Jesus who ensured that the synagogue was water-tight, that the minor repairs were done – every Vicar appreciates the people in his congregation who do those sort of jobs, and I'm sure a rabbi was the same! (Or is it just Vicars who are as cack-handed as me? I shall never forget Mr Giles, woodwork master at the Cambridge Grammar School for Boys' telling me "Barham, you are the most useless boy in all Cambridgeshire" when I broke the second hacksaw blade that afternoon. I blame all my DIY failures on him!). If Jesus stood up "as was his custom", he was probably more than just a useful man who could keep the roof

in good repair. I assume the rabbi was a friend, a mentor, someone who knew that he had someone special in his flock – someone who wondered what God would do through Jesus.



And the religious temperature of the town, and the area, had suddenly hotted up. There was always a dangerous tension between Jewish belief, Jewish zealotry, and Roman rule. Roman rule was pretty tolerant to all religious belief, but not to those religions who put their own God on a pedestal higher than the Emperor. Jewish people were used to keeping their heads down and getting on with their faith, and used to the fact that every now and then there was a disturbance, an eruption, religious zealotry that upset the peace. Usually it would die down after a few weeks, perhaps a crucifixion or two just to remind them who was really in charge.



*The Madonna and sleeping Christ Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist, by Piero di Cosimo*

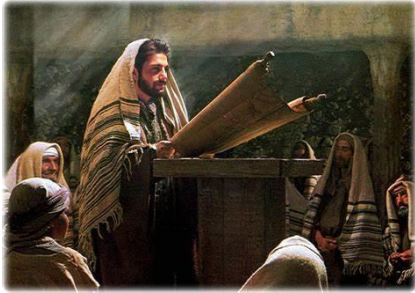
John the Baptist was the latest of these, and some folk remembered that his dad had been a temple priest. Perhaps some even remembered that Jesus was his cousin – perhaps John had been a frequent visitor to Mary and Joseph's family in his younger days – European artists certainly think he had been.



They knew that Jesus had been to the Jordan and had been baptised by John. Did they wonder why? Had the rumours that God had spoken as he came out of the water – had those rumours got back to Nazareth? Jesus went into the wilderness for 40 days – so was there someone in Nazareth rather annoyed that that cabinet they had been waiting for was now over a month late? Was the

carpentry business now in the hands of other family members – or was it up for sale?

And the rumour goes round that he is coming, he is back. (I don't want to sully this sermon by mentioning a certain former Prime Minister – but human nature hasn't changed). I wonder if there were more people in the congregation this morning, whether the rabbi was excited, or whether he was a bit annoyed that folk seemed to be there for Jesus, not for him.



Did he expect Jesus to use the words of Isaiah and relate them directly to himself? Had Jesus and the rabbi talked beforehand, was this what he was expecting – was he sitting there wondering if he should step in and stop Jesus, remind him that he is not a prophet, that he is not – and I can't resist quoting Monty Python – he is not the Messiah, he is a very naughty boy. When the synagogue was filled with rage, was the rabbi angry too? After all, he was going to be there next week, he had bring the congregation back to worship, he'd have to explain to the authorities what on earth had gone on.

If I'd been that rabbi, or you'd been normal members of that Nazareth congregation, what would we have felt? Would we believe that God was at work, willing to follow Jesus, to believe, to transform the world – or would we be the angry ones, the ones who didn't want the status quo to end, the people who went to the synagogue for Sunday worship where we knew what to expect, and that's what we wanted.

God does pick us up and shake us and challenge us and demand that we follow him. It isn't easy, it's rarely comfortable, but we accept his challenge because we know we are held in his love. The challenge we have is how we challenge this world, while showing we love it – but in God's help, we can do just that. Evil is defeated, even if it comes back from a Caribbean holiday pretending it is redeemed. Good will triumph, because nothing can separate us from the love of God. Amen.

Peter Barham, 22 October 2022