

Homily for the 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (24 Jan 2010)

By Fr Steele Hartmann OCSO

“And all eyes in the Synagogue were fixed upon him” (Lk 4:20). Today we are told that those looking on Jesus spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips (Lk 4:22). But this does not mean that all were open to what he had to say, for, as the story goes on, some began to say, “This is Joseph’s son, surely?” (Lk 4:22). “Where did he get this wisdom?” ... And they would not accept him (Mt 13:54,56). Knowing what was in their hearts (Mt 9:4), Jesus then insults them and says to them, “A prophet is only despised in his own country and in his own house” (Mt 13:57; Lk 4:24). “When they heard this”, we are told, “everyone in the synagogue was enraged. They sprang to their feet and hustled him out of the town, and they took him up to the brow of the hill the town was built on, intending to throw him down the cliff, but he slipped through the crowd and walked away” (Lk 4:28-30). Elsewhere we are told that among those who watched him in the synagogues were some who were ‘hoping for something to use against him’ (Lk 6:7; Mk 3:2). When they found what they wanted, they went out and began plotting ‘how to destroy him’ (Mk 3:6). There was nothing about Jesus that made people open to him and listen to what he might say. If Jesus were here speaking to us this morning, we, too, might find we have difficulty in accepting him.

I read about some people on a retreat. In a group discussion session, they were asked to share something of who had been Christ for them in their lives. One spoke of a friend who stayed on all through a long illness, while everyone else drifted away. Another spoke of a neighbour who took on a fatherly role when the father of a neighbouring family had gone into self-destruct mode. Most spoke of someone who brought comfort, compassion, healing or some other form of help. It was all very nice, until a woman stood up and said, “Well, the first thing I thought about, when I tried to think about who had been Christ for me, was: Who in my life has told me the truth so plainly that I wanted to kill him for it?” This woman truly understood what a Christ was supposed to be: not just someone who brings comfort, but someone who will tell us the plain truth, truth we need to know, though it will challenge us and upset us — that we will not only not thank him for, but will feel more like repaying by cutting him off, perhaps even killing him, or in some other way shutting him up that we don’t have to listen.

Today Jesus calls himself a prophet. Prophets are those who can bring comfort to those in distress, but are more likely to tell us we are going the wrong way. They are those offensive people God puts in our way to upset our equilibrium, so we do

not confuse our ideas of God with the real God. Jesus was one of these offensive people. Of what he had to say, many said, "This is intolerable language! Who could accept it?" and they stopped going with him (Jn 6:60). We, then, must expect that some of what Jesus has to say will not sit comfortably with us. We must also expect, then, that we, too, may be tempted to not go with him anymore, and give it all away — but this is not to say he is not speaking the truth. We need to come to know that he speaks the truth we need to listen to, and know that "when a good person strikes or reproveth me, it is kindness", as the Psalm puts it.

How are we, then, to approach Jesus, that we might be open to hear what he is saying? Last Sunday's Gospel story of water being changed into wine has a helpful suggestion. This story ends on a very encouraging note: "He let his glory be seen, and his disciples believed in him" (Jn 2:11). This we all need to see for us to arrive at that point where — when all others are walking away from him and Jesus is asking us, "What about you, do you want to go away, too?" — we, too, can declare: "Lord, to whom else shall we go? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe. We know that you are the Holy One of God" (Jn 6:67ff). Only such as these are open to receive and ponder and treasure it in the heart and ultimately put it into practice (Lk 2:19,51).

In the story the servants fill jars with water and take some to the steward who tastes it, but "it had turned into wine". St John continues the story this way: "Having no idea where it came from — only the servants who drew the water knew — the steward called the bridegroom" and congratulates him for keeping this wonderful surprise till now (Jn 2:9). It is the servants who know; it is the servants who saw. The steward is merely one of whom St John would later say, "Many believed when they saw the signs he gave, but Jesus knew them all and did not trust himself to them" (Jn 2:23-24). To such as these Jesus spoke only in parables, spoke to them only in so far as they were capable of understanding him, which wasn't far; it was only to his disciples that he would later explain everything, when they were alone (Mk 4:33-34).

In fact to them Jesus, himself, is the parable; he is the water that is really wine that we are asked to taste and see — but only those to whom the mother of Jesus said, "Do whatever [my son] tells you," are those who really know (Jn 2:5; c.f. Mk 9:8). This is the key to story: "Do whatever he tells you." A servant is one whom the centurion who came to Jesus aptly described: "Sir, ... I am under authority myself, and have soldiers under me, and I say to one man, 'Go,' and he goes; to another, 'Come here,' and he comes; to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it" (Mt 8:8-9). A servant is not one who discusses with the master the merits or rightness of what is being proposed. Nor is it necessary that the servant approve of or agree with what is

being proposed. It is not even required that the servant understand what is being asked. That he does what is asked is what is required. It is a doing thing. Initially, when we join the Lord's household we do so only as servants, or as St Benedict would put it, we enter into the 'school of the Lord's service' where we learn by doing, where practice is of the essence (*Rule of Saint Benedict* Prologue:45). We enter this school of the Lord's service to practice, not to theorise, as our Abbot has put it; it is a doing thing (Dom David Tomlins, *Abbot's Conference*, 19/1/2010). It is only as servants who do that we come to know.

It's like when I used to teach maths. The 'new maths' had just come in. This was based on the concept that if you understand something you will learn it more easily, and this is true — for adults. But I was teaching 12 year olds; they did not have the where-with-all to understand adequately. It didn't take me long to see the pointlessness of struggling to get them to understand. So I used not worry about the understanding and just concentrated on the doing: '1,2,3 ... do like me' was the rule. I knew, that, if they did their homework and bothered to ponder on what they were doing, they would eventually 'see' — the penny would drop, as they say. In the meantime they could do the maths, get the right answer, which was reward enough for the kids. Starting off they just had to take it on trust that 4 times 6 is 24. In time they would see this means that there are four lots of six in twenty four, making multiplication just a special form of addition. In the meanwhile, and until such insights occur, they were able to do the maths: if they wrote down 24 every time they were asked what is 4 times 6, they would get the right answer — and for many this is enough; the rest is bonus.

So it is in the Lord's service: it's a doing thing; in the doing we come to 'see'. In the meantime we are able to do what we must to be the Christian, to be one of the Lord's disciples. Starting off we just have to take it on trust that Jesus is the way and the truth (Jn 14:6). So we are given an assurance at the beginning of today's Gospel: "I in my turn," says St Luke, "after carefully going over the whole story, have decided to write an ordered account for you, that you may know how well founded the teaching is that you have received" (Lk 1:3). Starting off we just have to accept the word of those who know, and ultimately of those who knew him, that Jesus is the one. "We have found the Messiah/the Christ; Come and see," is their invitation (Jn 1:39,41). At this stage all we need do is Listen — which means simply 'hear and obey'. We do not need necessarily to understand what we hear, only that we do it. This is the lot of the servant/disciple.

"But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love", as St Benedict puts it (*Rule of Saint Benedict* Prologue:49). "Through this love, all that we

once performed with dread, we now begin to observe without effort, as though naturally, from habit, no longer out of fear of hell, but out of love for Christ, good habit and delight in virtue". We will come to see, and the understanding does make it easier. This, says Benedict, is the Holy Spirit at work in us (*Rule of Saint Benedict* 7:68-70; Lk 4:18). Through this Spirit, which Christ has sent on his disciples, we do come to the complete truth (Jn 14:26; 16:7-8,13; 20:22). Thus does Jesus explain his teaching to us, which at first seemed to us to be only riddles (Mt 13:10-15; Mk 4:13; Jn 16:29-30). It is then we 'see' Jesus' glory (Lk 24:31-32), the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth, and know him as the Father's beloved Son to whom we must listen, and we believe (Jn 1:14; Mt 17:5; Jn 2:11; 6:69). Of us we will hear it said, "Where did they get such wisdom?" (Mt 13:54; Acts 2:7).

And as we run on the path of his commands, we shall hear Jesus saying to us, "You are my friends, if you do what I command you. I shall not call you servants any more, because a servant does not know his master's business; I call you friends because I have made known to you everything I have learned from my Father" (Jn 15:14-15), and we shall know our place in the Lord's household is secure (Jn 8:35). What could be better than this!