

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 4 Year C 2019

Perhaps one of the deepest human instincts is to seek the approval of others. Most of us will use anything at our disposal to win and keep favour with others. We employ power and money, charm and personality, a sense of humour to attract people into our orbit. We want people to notice us and notice what is important to us. We like to be liked. But it's a tricky business. For many people now, their self worth and value has come to be based on how many 'likes' they get. People in the real world *and* our on-line world can engineer their lives so people approve of them and like them. So many people now engineer their lives around seeking the notice and approval of others. So much of politics now is engineered too: around polls and the curiously named 'approval ratings'. But all of us, sooner or later - and better sooner, to be frank - need to realise that not everyone will like us or approve of us. One of life's critical skills, then, is to learn to deal with rejection.

So, here we are in the early chapters of Luke's Gospel and already - so early in the piece - we are confronted with the painful and grim reality of Jesus' own rejection. It seems that the congregation in the Nazareth synagogue were at first quite open to Jesus' message. We are told, they are '*astonished by the gracious words that came from his lips.*' They are interested in what has been going on. And they want some of Jesus' wonder-working that they have heard about to come home to them. But they have tried to box Jesus in as simply 'Joseph's son'. That Jesus' home town should now reject him ought not surprise us. The Nazarenes initial approval of Jesus was superficial. When that is challenged, they reject him.

For those of us who remain committed to the life of faith - who continue to believe, who maintain a belonging to the church and what it teaches - know that our faith, in large measures, has been rejected by the culture around us. There is real pain and grief in that, I know, for many of you. It can be baffling and saddening that when just a half century ago the church was at the centre of community and social life now is derided, treated with suspicion and sometimes persecution.

Public expressions of faith are met with disapproval if not outright opposition. The time is coming, indeed it is already here when maintaining a distinct Christian ethic will become illegal, will be seen as subversive and dangerous and undermining the common good.

The faith, as many of us have known it, as you were raised and as you raised your own children, has been rejected. As in the gospel today, we find that our own homeland, the place where we grew up, the place where we are known and was so familiar has rejected us. As in the gospel it can feel as if we have been taken to the brow of the hill with the crowd attempting to throw us off the cliff. We might see the initial approval Jesus gained as echoing our situation as well. Perhaps we were liked and approved for all we did and achieved: for feeding and clothing the poor, for educating children, for caring the old and sick, for burying the dead, housing the homeless and a million and one other things we do that no one else wants to get their hands dirty doing. Perhaps our acceptability and standing in society endured so long because of the respectability it gave, for the stability it offered society, for the cohesive moral code it provided, for the monuments it left us in arts and culture. These are all fine and well and good but not really what faith is all about. And so, when we assert *faith* - when we become a sign of contradiction - then there comes the rub, the opposition, the rejection.

The truth is, there has been much in our past (and indeed much in our present) that has been distracting, that draws us away from our core business, that is engineered toward gaining approval and to being 'liked'. But as Paul says in the second reading today, '*be ambitious for the higher gifts.*' Do we really need to be liked by the State? Should we expect approval for what we do from government or society? We must remember that this was not how the church was born or grew. Being liked and approved of was not the environment the church formed itself in. We need to remind ourselves that if Jesus himself found it hard going, then perhaps this is to be our lot as well.

Now this is not a case for despair and hopefulness. Not at all. This is great opportunity. The Gospel today ends with the note that Jesus slips through the crowd and walks away. Perhaps this is what we need to do. And this is not an excuse to sit on our hands and wait or do nothing. Jesus continues - without the approval of men - his work of healing and teaching, of bearing the good news to all. Perhaps we too could walk away from our nostalgia and sentimentality for the past. Because this will only ever prevent us seeing what God's future is for us. Christians can spend a lot of time looking backwards, wanting things to be as they once were and being grumpy because they're not. We can waste time and money and effort and heartache seeking to be liked and approved. It may well be another generation or so before the church will have the confidence and strength to reassert itself. But we cannot imagine for a moment that it will be a return to how things once were. The ties have been cut, the culture has left us behind. But the future of the church - have no doubt - will be a purer, more authentic witness to the Gospel. Our task: to remain fast and true. It is God's church and he has a glorious future in store for it. Amen.