

**‘Who Do You Think You Are?’ –
A Homily for the 4th Sunday of Epiphany**

Nehemiah 8.1-3, 5-6, 8-10

1 Corinthians 12.12-31a

Luke 4.14-21

‘Who Do You Think You Are,’ the BBC series in which, in each episode, a celebrity goes on a journey to trace his or her family tree is now in its tenth series. The programme represents a quest to find out something about themselves through understanding the family and traditions that have shaped their past. In our modern society where cultural memory has become so thin and meaning seems only to be found in this present moment, this present experience, this programme has been rather refreshing; although I must say that there are only so many times I can cope with seeing the likes of Ainsley Harriott, Jeremy Paxman and Carol Vorderman break down in floods of tears as they discover something moving or surprising about some dim and distant relative.

Our Gospel reading today places Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, where he sets out who he is going to be, what kind of pattern his adult life is to take. I have often been excited to imagine the scene: this strangely familiar and yet compelling figure getting up to read from an ancient scroll, speaking words from the prophet about hope, freedom and release from prison that the community can hardly dare hear let alone believe, and then rolling up the scroll and uttering those astonishing words: “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Wow! You could probably have cut the atmosphere with a knife.

Just as those celebrities look back to their own family histories to bring them new meaning and significance, so now Jesus looks back to the ancient and powerful traditions of his people for his own self-understanding. But what is disclosed is no dull history, no mere record of facts, but a prophetic word, waiting to explode in the midst of that gathered people.

In Jesus, this ancient – almost silenced word – is brought back to life, breaking into the present, threatening with its newness.

And just what are these ancient prophetic themes that will characterise the life and ministry of the adult Jesus? [i] the first prophetic theme is that of inspiration: Jesus' imagination will be filled with the possibilities of the Spirit – he will be a person who will not be stuck in the patterns and restrictions of his day but someone whose heart and mind will be so open that he will be able to embrace a world as fully alive to God. This Jesus will be the person who can see the potential and dignity in all those he meets, his imagination piercing through the limiting constraints of a person's past to bring a new creation into being. He will be the kind of person who tells familiar stories but with a twist, stretching others to see the world as God sees it.

[ii] The second prophetic theme is that of Jubilee. This Jesus will be God's freedom song, ringing out throughout Israel, bringing hope out of despair, freedom from slavery, life out of death and love out of fear. This Jesus will proclaim the end of an era which only managed to wrap people up in economic debt and social constraint, the end to a time of ritual exclusion and cultural marginalisation. This Jesus will be the one to enact "the year of the Lord's favour," a radical time of table-fellowship and abundant provision, of social equality and the end of oppression; a time that brings heaven to earth.

What I've always been interested in is the moment in which Jesus decides to stop reading. The next line in the scroll of Isaiah reads thus: "the day of vengeance of our God" and yet here Jesus lets the prophetic witness go silent. It seems that Jesus refuses to mindlessly accept everything that tradition gives him, but is instead reading the scriptures in an adult and critical way. Time and again Jesus will caution his followers for wishing that God will perform his acts of vengeance upon those who do not heed their message. This is because Jesus knows that now is a time of grace and not wrath.

Perhaps Jesus understands that the people of Israel knew themselves to be a small minority, tossed about by bigger, more violent nations and so understood their yearning for

justice, for freedom for jubilee; and yet Jesus understood also that they couldn't divorce this yearning from a desire to see God wreak bloody vengeance on their enemies. But Jesus refuses to be this kind of Messiah. Jubilee will not flow from violence, vengeance and wrath, but from forgiveness, generosity and love. 'Who Do You Think You Are?' – Jesus looks deeply into the traditions of his people and discovers a word that is powerful and free, but he also discovers the shadows of past violence and guilt. He critically engages with his past, moving with its promise, but questioning its darker side.

How aware are we of the narratives and histories that shape us? At this point in the life of our nation particular narratives and myths are being told and re-told about who we are and what matters to us, but do we know what kind of nation we will be, what nation we should be? As we begin to learn how to read Scripture and to read our own national stories and histories, perhaps with Jesus we too are required to read in an adult way, picking up the promise, but setting down the threat, hearing words of promise and blessing, but shunning those of violence and suspicion. Perhaps in the end, this is what it means to "hear the word of the Lord". AMEN.