

“When God disappoints” a sermon based on Luke 4:21-30 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 31 January 2016.

When we think we have done all that is needed, and we are bypassed.

When we have been faithful as much as any ordinary person might be faithful and someone else is chosen.

The gospel today.

They had been drawn to this particular God.

The God of Abraham and Isaac, Sarah and Rebecca.

The God who had led them out of slavery,

Who had given ten commandments to guide their living.

Who had provided prophets to make them just.

Of course they were not perfect.

They had wandered from the way.

They had given in to other gods.

They had not lived as God expected.

But they might say, overall, through the centuries, we have tried to remain faithful. After all, here we are in the synagogue today.

We have built synagogues and sacrificed in the temple.

We have restored cities and renewed the community.

We have endured suffering in the name of God and cared for the alien and widow.

We have gathered for the reading and interpreting of scripture.

For generation after generation we have inducted people into the faith; hundreds of years of faithfulness.

And God promised to guide us, to keep us, to protect us, to save us. It's there in our Bible, the Hebrew scriptures.

These promises have sustained and guided us.

This is the faith we bring to the synagogue today – not some easy, shallow thing.

And now, here in front of us is one of us, from one of our families.

Mary's boy, Joseph's boy, our boy.

Surely he will remind us of God's faithfulness, assure us of God's care, interpret the scriptures for us.

We can sense the anticipation, the hope, the "pride".

And, what was he thinking? Why did he do this? He talked about what God did for others.

He talked of what God did for people who had not given themselves as we have given ourselves, who had not been promised what we have been promised, who were not part of the story of God as we are part of the story, people we did not even know.

Jesus said to them, something like - There were many people of faith sick and dying, but remember how Elijah went to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon, a foreigner, an outsider.

Jesus said to them, something like - There were many people of faith suffering from leprosy, but remember how God healed a leper from Syria, a foreigner, an outsider.

Last Sunday I talked about the Jubilee Jesus stepping into the Jubilee river – with his agenda: good news to the poor, release to the captives, freedom for the oppressed.

The people of faith knew poverty, captivity, oppression. So Jesus' agenda filled them with hope of good news, release, freedom. That was the God in whom they believed.

But Jesus tells stories of what God does for one who apparently had done nothing to deserve care or freedom or release.

She had served in the church for years. Hours of discretionary time. Evenings spent attending meetings, mentoring the young, serving others. Hours away from home and family. Hours sacrificed. Hours that could have been spent on herself. And she was good living, a healthy eater. And she is diagnosed with cancer.

They so wanted to be reconciled with rest of their family. They wrote letters. They gave gifts. They had tried to make contact. All returned. All refused. All declined. They prayed and pleaded and cried and sought mediation. Nothing. The others refused to respond.

He was known for his care of people. Visiting in times of illness. Cooking in times of need. Hosting in times of loneliness. Hospitable, attentive, thoughtful, compassionate, selfless. Yet when he thought he might have been able to use his gifts in greater service, people did not even think of him.

One way to deal with disappointment is to have low expectations.

So we sit an exam, and think we did ok, but we say we might fail, or scrape through, because we don't want to have high expectations dashed. Better to expect less. Not so far to fall.

And we can do it of God - a small God cannot do much, but at least we will not be disappointed.

The people today though, had high expectations of Jesus. So much promise, such gracious words, so insightful, Joseph's son, our boy.

But he was bigger now, with a bigger God. And this bigger God came into conflict with the limits of their hope for themselves, and when he started by talking about others, beyond themselves, they were furious, drove him out of town, took him to the brow of the hill, were about to throw him off.

Perhaps it's better to kill gods that don't do what we want.

It seems the God of Jesus does not order the universe around people of faith, according to the needs of a particular person or people or group, however good they are, however faithful they are.

It seems the God of Jesus does not arrange circumstances because we hope for them or pray for them.

What God promises, God promises for all ...

What God does, God does for all ...

Marilyn McCord Adams: "Expecting God to be interested in invidious distinctions among us would be like our judging the ladybugs to see which had paid us the appropriate honour!"

Its grace, reckless, non-discriminating love, spilling over for everyone.

But its too much, so the rage.

Then comes the dramatic action – he passes through the midst of them and went on his way.

In that action is our hope. In that action is our praying.

Our church exists, our faith exists, only because Jesus passes through our midst.

On his journey, entering by the back door, we encounter him here, but he is not staying here, he keeps walking, out the front door, on his way.

We cannot corral him, lasso him, persuade him to stay, tie him here, get him to do what needs to be done here, among us.

There is plenty of healing needed here, plenty of saving, plenty of teaching – more than enough.

But he moves on.

In going on his way, he shows God is free of us, to be God on God's terms, not ours.

In this is our praying.

Prayer is joining ourselves, our wills, our words, our ways, our world to the way of God – not joining God to ours.

With gratitude that we are counted among the widows of Zarephath and the lepers of Syria.

Prayer takes us with him, to align our world with the way of God, not aligning God with us.

From the shorter catechism - What is prayer? Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ ...

This freedom of God to go on God's way, is the oxygen of our freedom.

In the movie Amadeus, we hear of two men.

The devout Antonio Salieri, faithful, good, righteous, accomplished, but green-eyed;
Because God had lavished genius on a rakish, undeserving brat called Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

God's freedom of our human categories and limitations is the ground of our own freedom.

Freedom comes from the Jesus who passes through the midst of us, but does not stop here.
He goes on his way and calls us to follow him.