

## Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

*Jesus said to them: “Surely you will quote me the proverb, ‘Physician, cure yourself’, and say: ‘Do here in your native place the things we have heard were done in Capernaum...’ Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place...”*

We Australians are fairly well practised in cutting one another down to size. Unilaterally, we decide which people are getting too big for their boots and we waste no time in putting them in their place. From a reading of today’s gospel, it would seem that the townspeople of Nazareth had also learned the same art and to them Jesus was always going to be “the kid from across the street” or “the local carpenter’s boy”. We can accept local people who make a name for themselves on the stage or in the sporting arena or even in business or academia, provided that, when they come back home, they don’t start preaching to us. So it doesn’t take much to imagine the gossip that went around Nazareth following the synagogue service on that particular Sabbath when Jesus read from the scriptures and offered a commentary: “Who does he think he is coming back here and lecturing us, telling us how we should live our lives? Why, we’ve known him since he was just a bit of a kid, getting in his father’s way at the carpentry shop. The hide of him to stand up in the synagogue of all places and speak down to us like that.” Mind you, they did point out to him that they might be open to revising their opinions if he were to perform a miracle or two as he was reported to have done in Capernaum. There is little difference between what these local Nazarenes wanted and one of the temptations which the devil put to Jesus in the wilderness: “Make a name for yourself by following the power trail and working marvels! That will get people’s attention and support.” There was no faith dimension to what these people were asking of Jesus, and certainly no indication of higher motives.

There are two very clear messages for me in this story. The first is that it is a timely reminder to me of how I can easily categorise others based on my very first experience of them. Am I prepared to allow that they may have grown and developed and changed for the better in the intervening years? Prejudices developed early and mindlessly reinforced over time prevent us from softening our attitudes to so many people who are part of our network of friends, relations and acquaintances.

Secondly, if I dare to stop and analyse such reactions in the context of my vocation as a Christian, I soon realise that they don’t make any sense at all, because, as a disciple of Jesus, there should be a prophetic dimension to the way I live. And that applies to all of us: What we say and do, the values we live by, the way we conduct ourselves should give observers something to stop and think about. We are all meant to be prophets. But when we are, we risk being rejected by those who think they know us.

Last July, the Jesuit periodical, *America* carried an article entitled “The Power of One” by English theologian and writer on spirituality, Margaret Silf. In the course of the article, Silf tells a story of a small contingent of battered and bedraggled allied prisoners of war who were being marched through the centre of a small German village. The main street was lined with onlookers, some smiling smugly, but others wiping away tears at the sight of these poor,

miserable prisoners, many of whom were mere boys. The starving prisoners looked utterly done in, with despair etched into their faces. The grim silence of the scene was broken when a middle-aged woman, a mother herself, ran up to one of the prisoners and thrust a loaf of bread into his hands. Just as quickly, she turned and ran back into her house. The risk she took had its impact on other onlookers and, in next to no time, people were coming from all directions offering food to the prisoners. One simple act of courage was sufficient to transform despised enemy prisoners into men who were someone's husbands, sons and brothers. (cf "The Power of One", Margaret Silf, *America*, July 6-13, 2009)

Acting prophetically begins with embracing what is right and just and then being courageous enough to take a stand against whatever threatens it. Our baptism calls us to be prophets of God's justice and truth and compassion and forgiveness, costly though that may be. Baptism also calls us to be open to recognising the prophets in our midst whose example invites us to reach out to others in compassion, generosity, consolation and peace whenever and wherever they are needed. Perhaps the biggest challenge for most of us is accepting ourselves as prophets. We are often too afraid, too anxious about what others might say or think, too self-absorbed to take on our baptismal responsibility of being teachers, leaders, reconcilers and healers in God's compassion. It's much easier to sit on the sidelines and take potshots at those who we are convinced need to be cut down to size. Maybe they threaten us just a little too much.