

When Jesus read the passage from Isaiah which we just heard in our gospel story it was very likely the set reading for that day in the synagogue. A bit like our lectionary which gives us, usually, a reading from the Old Testament, the Epistles and a Gospel, the Jewish “lectionary” usually started with a reading from the Torah or the Law, first five books of what we call the Old Testament, and then a reading from one of the Prophets. Jesus was clearly called to do the second reading. This custom is still practiced in synagogues today and it was, and still is, considered an honour to be called to read in the synagogue. Commenting on a passage of scripture also has a long and honoured history in the Jewish faith and it was the role of the Rabbi, or teacher, to do exactly this. The element of surprise which Jesus introduces is found in the last verse of our gospel this morning: *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*. It sounds harmless enough but in fact if you read on in the gospel making this bold statement got Jesus run out of town and eventually led to his death which we will mark in the coming Easter season.

Pope Francis in Joy of Gospel reminds us firmly that evangelisation is not just about words, it is about action too. (read extracts) We might find it uncomfortable but Pope Francis, echoing the words of Jesus, reminds us that the proclamation of the gospel has a very clear social content. Being a Christian, is about being an evangelist, and being an evangelist is not just about a personal relationship with a God, a private/personal faith, being a Christian, being an evangelist is about caring for others, especially the poor and those in need. Right at the heart of our faith in Jesus is the call to follow him in his care for the poor and the outcast. We are called to hear the cries of those in need and to respond to those cries with action. Sometimes this solidarity with the poor and outcast is misunderstood - it does not mean just the occasional acts of generosity. It rather requires an entirely new outlook which sees the worlds in terms of community. Seeing the world in this new way, as Jesus calls us to do, comes with a risk and a warning. We risk provoking anger in those who are invested in the status quo which sees the world in terms of what they can get for themselves with little regard for others. If we really try to live out this gospel call then the story of Jesus in the synagogue should warn us that *fulfilling scripture* in our lives, in our communities, will very likely be unpopular.

Yet Pope Francis reminds us clearly that *to evangelise is to make the kingdom of God present in our world*. In order to make something present we have to live it out in our actions as well as believe it with our whole heart. I think we are often overwhelmed by this call to action as well as belief. It is scary simply because it is risky and may well put us at odds with the way wider society believes and acts. We buy into the hype of declining church numbers and retreat into our own little world of self-preservation. If we don't call attention to ourselves by rocking the boat then maybe the world will leave us in peace.

But we are called not just to rock the boat, we are called to steer the boat in an entirely different direction. There is so much in the news today internationally, nationally and locally that clamours for our attention, asks us to make important decisions and warns us of dire consequences of deciding one way or another. The refugee crisis brings tears to my eyes. The sight of people risking their lives fleeing war and violence makes me, as a Christian, respond with compassion. But the media, politicians and others generate an atmosphere of fear instead of compassion. I find myself asking if it were me and my family on one of those boats what would I hope to find when I reached the end of my perilous journey?

There is more than enough in the news today that seems overwhelming it is hard to see how we as a small, and if we believe the news declining, unimportant and largely irrelevant group of Christians here in Strathnairn, can make any difference. How do we fight fear with compassion? How do we rock the boat enough to make it change direction? How do we resist the temptation to keep our faith close and personal instead of risking reaching out to change even how as a local community we treat each other, never mind the wider world?

I don't know if you can remember back to week one of this series of sermons but I talked then about a way of reading scripture or other spiritual writings called *lectio divina, or divine reading*? You do this by reading a passage slowly, maybe several times, and paying attention to the word or phrase which literally leaps out at you or sinks into your soul. When I read through the extracts from Joy of the Gospel in preparation for this sermon, the passage which really hit me was *small but strong in the love of God, repeat*.

For me this is how we become compassionate, active evangelists, how we become practitioners of *pastoral mission* in our own community and across the world. Instead of buying into the hype that bigger is necessarily better we embrace being *small but strong in the love of God*. Instead of accepting the media, politicians and others telling us to react in fear to worlds's challenges we embrace being *small but strong in the love of God* and react instead with compassion. It is OK to be small but not OK to let that makes us fearful because we maybe *small **but we are strong in the love of God***. A good reminder as we prepare to celebrate Easter that it was a group of disciples *small but strong in the love of God* who became the first missionaries to preach the good news, of the gospel of Jesus Christ.