Taking Offence at Jesus
Luke 4:22-31

Have you ever been in a meeting, maybe to do with work, or elsewhere, where the atmosphere suddenly changes? Things were going really well, everyone was happy and then someone says something and everything changes, and what was pleasant and jokey suddenly turns icy?

Well about a year and a half ago we had a church members' meeting, which I will forever remember as the night of the church bulletins. Things were going really well, everyone was excited and encouraged by what God was doing, until someone raised the issue of the church bulletins and asked the totally legitimate question of whether we really needed to print them in colour and maybe did we even need them at all. And out of nowhere we found ourselves in the middle of a heated discussion on the merits or otherwise of colour church bulletins. And those of us involved laughed about it afterwards: how on earth did we manage to turn what was a perfectly harmonious meeting into a full-blown, heated, arm-waving debate? I mean where did that come from?

Well, look what happens in this passage. Jesus is in his home synagogue in Nazareth. He's just sat down from reading this passage from Isaiah that speaks of God's servant, anointed by the Holy Spirit, proclaiming good news to the poor and proclaiming liberty to captives and the oppressed and recovery of sight to the blind; and then He sits down and says 'today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' And Luke tells us in v22 that as His home town listened to Jesus preach 'all spoke well of him and marvelled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth.' But within six verses, in v28 Luke says 'when they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath.' And they try and lynch Jesus by throwing Him off the cliff.

So within a few minutes this congregation of good religious folk has gone from idolising Jesus and hanging on His every word, to trying to kill him. What's happened? What makes them turn on Him so rapidly, when He doesn't even mention coloured bulletins? What does Jesus say that makes them so angry?

Well, the reasons for what happens here tell us a lot about why people reject Jesus.

Familiarity Breeds Contempt:
So Jesus is sitting in front of the people He's grown up amongst, His neighbour, His family and as He's talking to them they're sat there thinking this guy's good and as His sermon ends they turn to each other and everyone's talking about what a great speaker He was.

The problem is of course, that hearing a good message is not the same as taking it to heart. James – Jesus' brother - says (James 1:22) 'Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourself.' Because you can hear the word of God, you can memorise the word of God, you can give chapter and verse on the word of God, but still not do what it says. And you can listen to great sermons by outstanding preachers on your ipod, and think that was a superb message, and walk away unchanged because we haven't mingled our hearing with responsive

faith and obedience. And the people of Nazareth's appreciation for Jesus' sermon didn't go further than 'great message!'

In fact what starts going round the synagogue is something else, and it starts replacing the 'marvelling at his words'. V22: And they said 'is not this Joseph's son?' Hang on a second, I know He speaks really well, but we know this guy, He's the carpenter's son, He's Joseph's boy, so who does He think He is making these claims for Himself about being anointed by the Spirit and the Scripture being fulfilled because He's come?

And these folk thought they knew Jesus, they had him worked out, they had Him all boxed up, when in reality they hadn't a clue who He really was. They knew something about Him, but their knowledge was only partial and when He challenged that, they took exception to it.

And a little bit of religious knowledge can have the same effect for us. Maybe you've always thought of yourself as a Christian because, well, you've grown up in a Christian nation and you're not a Muslim or a Hindu, and you naturally associate yourself with Christianity, but the Jesus you know is a kind of patchwork of what you picked up in religious education lessons at school, or from the TV, or by occasional church attendance and you *think* you know Him when in reality – and maybe you're beginning to realise this - you don't know Jesus as He really is. What you know of Him may or may not be right, but it's an incomplete picture. Well, it's for people like us that Luke writes this Gospel, to help us get to meet and know the real Jesus. So if you recognise that as true for you, why not set yourself the challenge to read this gospel of Luke's before Christmas and if you haven't got a Bible we'd love to give you one. And when you hear things that challenge your understanding of who Jesus is, like the claims He makes, don't reject them out of hand as these folk at Nazareth did, instead investigate it for yourself. Because if Jesus is more than Joseph's son, if He is what the Bible claims He is, that has profound implications for all of us.

But there's also a danger for those of you who have grown up in Christian families, because, like these guys at Nazareth, you've kind of grown up with Jesus and you *kind* of know Him. But the Jesus you know may not be the Jesus of the Gospels. Maybe the Jesus you've met is a Jesus of law and regulations, a Jesus of plastic smiles and hypocrisy, a Jesus of legalistic zeal that looks down on those who don't match up, and the Jesus who has come full of the Spirit to preach good news of God's grace to the poor, to proclaim liberty and freedom to captives, to announce the year of the Lord's favour seems a million miles away to the so-called Jesus you grew up with. If that's you, enjoy afresh, maybe for the first time, encountering the real Jesus.

And for those of you in the youth, who are growing up in Christian families now, and maybe *you* kind of know Jesus. But that 'kind of know Him' has never reached the level of you deciding for yourself or of putting your own faith and trust in Jesus. You sort of know Him, but you sort of don't. And the danger is that you either end up with a half-boiled faith in a Jesus you only half know, or you slowly drift away or even reject this Jesus you sort of know, when all the time

you've never encountered the real Jesus. Well, you need to encounter Him for yourself by coming out from the shadow of your parents' faith and discovering who Jesus is for yourself.

And here at Nazareth, in front of His home crowd, Jesus knows what they're thinking and He pre-empts their objection to Him and He says in v23 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself.' What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.' In doing so, Jesus shines a spotlight on why they and others after them will reject Him.

When God doesn't give you what you want.
What the congregation want is proof: Physician heal yourself; do here what you've done elsewhere, you're making these claims about yourself, so prove it by doing a miracle. You say you've come to restore the sight of the blind, well, actions speak louder than words.

And when Jesus refuses to give them what they want they resent it and take one step closer to rejecting Him.

I think one of the most dangerous times in your life is when God doesn't give you what you want. You've prayed for something, you desperately wanted some outcome, you wanted this situation to change, or for God to act in this or that way, and He doesn't do it. And you're left with seemingly no answers and the nagging question 'Why didn't you come through for me God?'

And that kind of profound disappointment in God is a time of real danger because in that moment, disappointment can become resentment and resentment can become bitterness. And at the mild end a spiritual coldness can settle over your heart, because you're holding this thing against God, and any passion or heart engagement in worship and love for God goes out the window, and your soul goes into a spiritual deep freeze; and at the other end of the spectrum you can end up rejecting Him completely.

Now, what's behind that? What's at the root of our going cold on Him or turning our backs on Him when things don't work out how we want, when He doesn't give us what we want? Well, it's what lies behind these people's request for a miracle and their subsequent rejection of Jesus. And that is that we can have this idea that God owes us; for them it was 'hey Jesus, we're your home-town, we know who you are, and if you're making these great claims you need to show us some proof. The burden lies with you Jesus, if you want us to believe, then you owe it to us to do this'. And for you and me, disappointment can become resentment and resentment bitterness when we think, 'God, I've prayed, I've lived right, I've never done this or that, I've kept my side of the bargain, you owe me this God'.

And when God doesn't give us what we want we can turn away from Him as these people at Nazareth did. Moses warned the people of Israel against doing just that in Deuteronomy 29:18: 'Beware lest there be among you a man or woman… whose heart is turning away today from the Lord our God to go and

serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit.' And what can happen in those times of disappointment, when we think God hasn't done what He should have done, is we can turn away from Him, and we go looking elsewhere, we turn to other gods, or to false gospels, and that, says Moses is a root that grows into all kinds of bitter and poisonous fruit, just as it did for these good religious folk in Nazareth.

Now you may need to hear that for the future, because the truth is it is highly likely that you will face times – if you haven't already - when things don't go the way you want and God doesn't give you what you want. And you need to know how you're going to handle that. But for some of us, this is not some hypothetical question for the future, this is something you're living through now, or you bear scars from the past, and there are these scars of disappointment. And you feel this coldness in your heart towards God, and you're struggling to trust Him for the present.

That was a struggle Job knew only too well. Despite living an exemplary life Job loses every-thing: his children are killed, his wealth and business are destroyed and finally his health cracks as well. And his wife turns to him and says (Job 2:9) 'Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die.' 'Why are you still holding onto God, Job, you've lived your life of integrity and look what good that's done you: curse God and die.' And Job's answer is deeply sobering 'Shall we receive good from God and shall we not receive evil?' (Job 2:10)

God is sovereign, says Job, and I'm going to trust Him whatever the circumstances of my life, whatever He sends my way. And God may not give you what you want but He is sovereign and He is wise, and He is love, and He will always work out His purposes for your best. You may not understand that, just as Job struggled to understand it. But the fruit of faith and trust are always sweeter than the bitter and poisonous fruit of rejecting God.

And again knowing what they're all thinking in v24 Jesus tells them 'Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his home town.' And He goes on to remind them of two stories from Israel's past that warn these people of Nazareth of the danger of rejecting God's messengers and as He does so, these stories become the tipping point for their anger.

When Religion Gets in the Way

Both these stories about Elijah and Elisha occur at one of the lowest points in Israel's history. The nation has all but abandoned God and they're following hard after pagan idols. And to bring them to their senses, God sends a drought and famine. So everyone is going hungry, God's people are, literally, starving. And Jesus makes the point, ' with that going on, who does God send his prophet Elijah to?' He sends him to a gentile woman, to a non-Jewish widow, to an idol-worshipping foreigner, who – if you read the original story in the Old Testament in 1 Kings 17, is reduced to collecting sticks and is down to her very last meal; who when Elijah goes to her and asks her for some food she says 'As the Lord your God lives [she doesn't even worship God, God isn't her God], I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am

gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.'

So, she's down to her last meal, and God sends Elijah to her and through a miracle of God's grace and provision her flour doesn't run out and her oil doesn't stop flowing, and in time this woman comes to put her faith in the God of Elijah. So of all the people going hungry God visits this idol-worshipping poverty-striken, gentile woman.

And then Jesus tells them the story of Naaman's healing (2 Kings 5). And Naaman was the commander of the army of the king of Syria. Now, Syrians aren't very popular in Israel today and they weren't any more so back in Elisha's time. So think 'Commander of the King of Syria's army' and think 'public enemy number one'. He's a foreigner, he's a gentile, he's an idol worshipper, he leads raids into Israel, and on top of it all, he's a leper. So to any Israelite there are a multitude of reasons why God should blam Naaman, not bless him.

But a young Israelite girl whom Naaman has taken into captivity and has as a servant in his house tells Naaman's wife about Elisha and if only Naaman would go and see Elisha he could be healed of his leprosy. So Naaman goes and with him he takes ten talents of silver – that's 340kg of silver; and 6 thousand shekels of gold - that's 66 kg of gold, in the hope that he can buy his healing.

And he goes to Elisha's house, and Elisha tells him to wash six times in the Jordan River, which he very reluctantly agrees to do, and as he does so God heals him and cleanses him of leprosy and Elisha doesn't take a penny of his silver or his gold – because you can't buy God's grace. So of all the thousands of lepers in Israel at that time, God heals a gentile, idol-worshipping, army commander from Israel's arch-enemy Syria.

In other words Jesus is warning these religious folk in the synagogue at Nazareth: if you reject me, like the Israelites rejected God and His prophets in those dark days of Elijah and Elisha, if you harden your hearts to me, you are no better than them and God's grace will simply move on to those who will receive it, even to the kind of gentiles you despise.

And that is what pushes these people in the synagogue over the edge, because this widow from Zarephath and Naaman the leprous Syrian army commander would have been the absolute bottom of the pile in their eyes, and the thought that God would go to people like that and bypass good religious people like them is too much. And their reaction exemplifies the reaction of religion against the gospel of God's grace. Religion, in all its various manifestations, is all about us earning and working our way to God, that if we do this or that, or behave like this or that, God is indebted to us. Whereas the gospel of God's grace is that none of us deserve God's grace and forgiveness, and nothing we could ever do could ever put God in our debt, as if He could ever owe us anything, and none of us are any better than this widow or Naaman the Syrian leper, and yet God in His grace and mercy provides for us as He did the widow and heals us as He did the leper. And religion has a hard time accepting grace, just as these folks in the synagogue had

a hard time accepting Jesus, because religion says 'now you're good enough' and grace says 'you never can be good enough, but it's by grace'.

The question of course is 'how?' How can God be gracious to the likes of Naaman and the widow, when they didn't deserve it either? How can God be gracious to them and gracious to us who are no better than them?

The Time Will Come

In v28 Luke says that 'when they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath.' That's a strong reaction isn't it? It's the power of self-righteous religion, reacting against any suggestion that in ourselves, through our own efforts, we don't deserve God's mercy and He would be justified in passing us by, and this crowd who just a few minutes ago were hanging on Jesus' words, now want to throw Him over the cliff.

But Luke says in v30 'passing through their midst, he went away'. Whether in the confusion he slipped away, or whether God did something miraculous here Luke doesn't say. Whichever it was, they don't get their wish, they don't kill Jesus, this time. But the time will come. And the same Jesus who now walks through the crowd baying for his blood will in a few years, surrender himself to a crowd made up of very similar people and be crucifed by the Romans, as the Jewish leaders look on saying 'he saved others, let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, His chosen one' (Luke 23:35). He claimed to be the one anointed by the Spirit, He claimed to be the Christ – which means the anointed one – He claimed that God had chosen Him as His prophet, well, it's time for Him to save Himself, it's time for Him to prove it.

So what happens here in the synagogue at Nazareth is just a foretaste of what will happen in Jerusalem. But Jesus doesn't save Himself in Jerusalem, in fact it is this final giving of Himself, in His death, as He takes upon Himself our sin, that opens the door for you and I to receive God's grace. That men and women like us, no better than the widow, no better than Naaman, can receive the grace and the forgiveness of God because of what Jesus has done for us, not because of re ligion or anything we can do.

As we close, these guys reject Jesus because they think they know Him, when in reality they don't know the real Jesus. If that's you I just encourage you to look into this for yourself, read the gospel and allow it to speak for itself. They reject Him because He doesn't give them what they want. If that's you and in your heart you've turned away because things haven't worked out the way you wanted, turn back to Him today and trust Him. And finally, they reject Him because of religious pride, and the answer to that is acknowledging that none of us can do anything to earn God's favour, yet He pours it out upon us as we turn to Him in faith.