

John Martin asks how well we understand Jesus' message



Physician

heal yourself

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...' (Isaiah 61:1)

There's nothing like the buzz when someone who grew up in a village comes back to home to preach. I remember such an experience over 30 years ago and it still gives me cold shivers.

I was a second year student and my highly enthusiastic brother not only put leaflets all over the place but brought a singing group including electric guitars (unheard of) to replace the church's wheezy reed organ.

There was a huge turnout: people who'd known me since I was in short trousers, known my father, my grandfather and grandmother, the first couple married in the church. Some could tell tales of my great-grandfather, one of the pioneers of the district.

Like many a student I delivered something akin to a PhD thesis. Eyes glazed over. Then the old minister got up. 'Well, it's nice to hear from this young man. I'm sure that as he reads a bit more theology he'll see that what he's said today doesn't stand up!'

To tell the truth I didn't mind. Intuitively I sensed he was right, but the locals were livid. They may not have made sense of what I had to say, but a know-all incomer who hardly knew anyone had no right to publicly criticise a local lad.

No doubt there was a buzz when Jesus returned to his hometown Nazareth. Word had come about what he'd done in nearby Capernaum. Maybe he would settle down now. His

wonderworking would surely attract crowds and boost the local economy. No one was nodding off in the synagogue this Sabbath.

Jesus quickly runs into a wall of unbelief and scepticism. How can a local lad claim that the rule of God has come right here and now - through his agency? We know his family. They're not that special. So young man, if you are what you claim, show us a sign. It's said you performed miracles in Capernaum. Maybe the reports are over-egged.

We know two things about the people who rejected Christ that day. First, they were the present-day heirs of a people who had enjoyed God's special care for generations. They were part of the Israel of God, people who knew God's works and his ways. Second, they were people who in human terms knew all there was to know about Jesus. They had all the advantages but tragically they failed to enter the inheritance that God had planned for them.

It's a warning to us. We are people who have been favoured with knowledge of God. He has showered blessings unnumbered on us. Even so it's possible for our eyes and ears to be blocked. Do we properly hear the manifesto Jesus unveiled in that day Nazareth? Jesus announced a new deal for the poor. Is the faith we claim to possess Good News for the poor in practical and real ways?

Are we, like Jesus kinsfolk and neighbours, people who on surface level know practically all there is to know about Christ, but tragically fail to grasp the full import of his message?

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