



The Holy Spirit Province NEWSLETTER



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TRUE AND FALSE RELIGION: 4TH SUNDAY C

Jeremiah 1:4-5; 17-19; 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13; Luke 4:21-30

Every now and then a family decides to leave the hustle and bustle of a big city and move to a small town or village in the country. City life has become too busy, too chaotic, too demanding, and too impersonal. They go to a place where, they claim, people know one another and care about one another. In their escape from the city, they are looking for more meaning, acceptance, and a greater sense of belonging.

What such city people are looking for among country people generally happens, especially in times of crisis. For example, when someone is hurt in an accident, somebody loses a loved one from a sudden heart attack, someone's house burns down, or is washed away in a flood! Such events bring out the best in neighbours. They arrive with kind words, hugs, and kisses, and any number of casseroles to tide the family over till they can get back on their feet.

But there can be a downside to everyone knowing everybody else. I know this from personal experience, being brought up as a child in two tiny towns. Some people may become the target of suspicious, gossiping, mean, and nasty neighbours. This is certainly what happens to Jesus when he comes back to his own people at Nazareth. At first, they welcome him as their local boy made good, their town hero. They are full of praise for what they have heard about him – his good, kind, and powerful deeds, and his insightful and challenging messages.

But one influential group in the town becomes particularly jealous, annoyed, and angry with him. 'He's become too big for his boots,' they say, 'too high and mighty.' They begin to sneer: 'Who does he think he is? No better than anyone else, surely! Just the son of that carpenter, Joseph, that's what! As ordinary as everybody else around here!'

They, and others like them, decide that if Jesus has anything to offer, they, the people of his hometown, should be the first to benefit. Without showing any real faith in him as God's agent and spokesperson, they begin to demand that he do in Nazareth some of the wonderful things he is said to have been doing elsewhere.

But Jesus speaks back to them the plain truth, the truth they need for their good: In the emerging community and kingdom of God, there is no place for any privilege. What matters most is to have faith, and together with faith, trust and love. God's love and help begin wherever there is a human need for it, as happened to the starving widow of Zarephath, and Naaman, covered with leprosy. Both were Gentiles, non-Jews. But they were persons in need, and therefore loved and cared for by God like any Jewish person.

At this message of the indiscriminate love of God, the people of his hometown are outraged. They turn on Jesus. They throw him out of their synagogue and even try to hurl him over a cliff.

Jesus at Nazareth was experiencing the fate of all prophets. But prophecy, being a spokesperson for God, is not about pleasing people. It's about speaking the truth, sometimes the truth that no one wants to hear, the truth that often gets covered up, and yet the truth that one must hear and heed for one's own good.

But why did the locals turn on him with such fury? The first reason was what he said. But there was a deeper reason. It was because he showed up the ugly parts of their personalities. After all, if you stir up a stagnant pool, a lot of mud comes to the surface.

Sad to say, religion can become misunderstood, twisted, and distorted. When that happens, it tends to bring out the worst in people. They become narrow and bigoted, feisty and fanatical, mean and nasty, hateful and hurtful, even to the point of wanting to kill anyone who dares to disagree with them. This is just what has happened recently in Pakistan to that good and brave Christian woman, Asia Bibi.

True religion, however, and especially following Jesus, brings out the best in people. It liberates and humanizes them. It makes them friendlier, more accepting, and more forgiving persons. It fosters harmonious relationships and builds community. When this happens, religion is something beautiful.

In true religion, there is an essential link between faith and love – helping others because of what we believe. St Paul emphasizes that in our Second Reading today when he says: 'there are three things that last: faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these is love'.

But what's the use of having both faith and hope if we are lacking in love? The question, then, each of us must ask, and keep asking, is this: What does my religion bring out in me? Is it making me a better person? Is it making me less selfish, less angry, less assertive and aggressive, and instead, a kinder, gentler, and more generous human being? Is it? Or is it not?

bgleesoncp@gmail.com