

Epiphany 3 Year C Kevin Moroney

“When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom.”

When I saw the town Nazareth pop up in this gospel lesson, the echo of a fairly recent memory bounced around in my brain. I recalled seeing an article in the paper about Nazareth right around Christmas time, so I went on the web site of the Inquirer, searched for it and found that, sure enough, on Tuesday, December 22nd an article appeared with the title “Dwelling unearthed in Nazareth is dated to time of Jesus.”

Now, I don’t know about you, but I’m always fascinated when an archeological find fills out our knowledge of biblical times, particularly regarding the life of Jesus. The story tells how last summer, when builders were digging up the courtyard of a former convent, they found the remains of a wall, a hideout, a courtyard, and a water system that collected water from the roof. It all measured about 900 square feet and may have been for an extended family, and most fascinating to me is the fact that the chances of Jesus not knowing this house from the first century are very, very slim. He was almost certainly there.

All this got me thinking about our gospel lesson and what exactly Jesus was walking into when he returned home after beginning his public ministry in the surrounding countryside. Was his hometown anything like my hometown of Summit, NJ? So I returned to the Internet, looked up everything I could find on Nazareth in the 1st century, and the clear answer is that what Jesus knew as a hometown was very different than what I and probably most of you would recognize.

Nazareth was a small village that was founded somewhere between 600 and 900 BC, according to pottery dating, but it was destroyed and abandoned around 600 BC, not to be populated for

hundreds of years. It sits in a basin surrounded by hills, and there was a scarcity of natural resources such as water and fertile soil, so it was relatively poor and unimportant. Most historians of the period neglect to even mention it.

In the 1st century, Nazareth was a small village settled by only a few dozen families. And so Jesus, as the son of a carpenter, a tradesman, would've been higher up the social ladder than many of the 120-150 people who lived there. That's right, I said 120-150, which means that, as a carpenter, Jesus was a fairly prominent citizen of a village that was less than half the size of this parish!

So does that give you a clearer picture of the scene Jesus walked into on that Sabbath day as he entered his home synagogue? Everyone present, of every age, would have known Jesus well, would've known him all his or their life. Many would've been related to him. Can you imagine their curiosity regarding the fantastic stories they were hearing about him?

So good old Jesus, cousin Jesus, Jesus the guy who lives 3 huts down, came into the synagogue with some of his new friends, read a passage from the prophet Isaiah which everyone knew was about the coming Messiah, sat down and said: "It's about me," which is my rough translation of his words: "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

I bet you could've heard a pin drop. What do you imagine was going through people's minds? I suppose it was similar to where people's minds are in most services. There were probably some people whose minds had wondered off and missed it completely. There were probably those who were kind of paying attention but who didn't make the connections. And there were probably those who were very mindful of the stir he had caused around the region and who were sitting on every word he said.

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." How so? Had Jesus released any captives, restored sight to the blind or

freed any who were oppressed? Nothing like that is described in this lesson.

What is so jarring about this gospel reading is that Jesus walked into a group of people who had known him all his life and who had known him as a decent but otherwise unremarkable fellow, and he announced in the most symbolically potent way possible that he was in fact the Messiah of God.

What on earth had happened to this guy? Or, perhaps better stated: "What in heaven had happened to this guy?"

Well, that is a question for the ages. What we know is that between the ages of 30 and 33, Jesus of Nazareth changed the world with his teaching, healing, death and resurrection.

What is difficult for us to realize is that the great change that took place in his life was quite challenging for those who knew him prior to the age of 30. "Isn't this the carpenter's son whom we have known all his life?"

This is, in fact, the first of a two-part sermon, so if you want to see how his neighbors and relatives reacted to his announcement, not to mention what I have to say about it, come back next week for the second installment of "He said what?"

Amen.