

Jesus rejected at Nazareth

Galilee was the scene of Jesus' early ministry. Jesus had grown up in this northern province ruled by Herod. In many ways it had felt the influence of the Romans and other Gentiles much more than the Jewish area around Jerusalem. Consequently, Galileans were treated with some disdain by the religious leadership in the south.

At His baptism in the Jordan River by John, Jesus had heard the voice of His Father, and the Spirit rested upon Him. Then, in the desert immediately after His baptism, He had defeated Satan. In no time at all, news about Him and His activities spread through the whole countryside. He went into the village synagogues to teach the people. These synagogues were the buildings where the people assembled for worship and study of the Old Testament. Everywhere Jesus was praised.

After reporting in general on the beginnings of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, Luke tells of one specific incident in Nazareth that provides a contrast to the usually favourable response. Nazareth had only one claim to fame: it was the insignificant village where Jesus was brought up. Mary probably continued to live here; Joseph seems to have died, since no mention is made of his activity after the story of the 12-year-old Jesus in the temple.

Jesus was in Nazareth on the Sabbath Day. As He had so often done in the past, Jesus went into the village synagogue on that day. The synagogue service included the reading of the Old Testament law and prophets. Jesus was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and He read Isaiah 61:1-2. The words were those of the Servant of the Lord who declared that the Spirit was on Him. He had been anointed to preach good news to the poor, to open the eyes of the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

When Jesus had finished the reading, He rolled up the scroll and handed it back to the attendant. Already His reading of this passage must have deeply impressed the people, for their eyes were fixed on Him as He sat down to expound this Scripture. His words at first pleased them: "*Today, while you are listening, this passage of Scripture has been fulfilled.*" The age of the Messiah has dawned; the Servant of the Lord has come.

But gradually the implications of what Jesus was saying struck home. He Himself was that servant of the Lord who had been anointed with the Spirit. His ministry was to preach and teach and heal. This was too much for these people; they knew the identity of the one saying these things - "*Is this not Joseph's son?*"

The hometown people had not known this man to be a miracle worker when He was among them. Rumours had come of some healings performed by Jesus in Capernaum, but these people of Nazareth needed convincing that Jesus was anything more than a rather precocious Bible student. Jesus makes reference to their doubts in a well-known proverb that asks the doctor to prove his wares by doing some healing.

No healings were forthcoming from Jesus. Rather, He declared that His ministry is one much wider than simply to impress people back home. He cited two well-known Old Testament stories about the prophets Elijah and Elisha. Elijah was sent to help a non-Israelite widow survive the severe famine, though there were many suffering widows at home (1 Kings 17:7-24). Elisha healed the gentile general Naaman, though there were many lepers in Israel (2 Kings 5:1-19).

The people at once caught the implications of what Jesus was saying. They needed to break out of the narrow view of the Messiah as coming only to establish an earthly kingdom for the Jews. The Servant of the Lord had come to seek and to save the lost wherever they may be and whoever they were. This was too much for the Nazarenes. Filled with fury, they drove their native son from the town and took Him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, intent on throwing Him down the cliff (we are reminded of the devil's temptation asking Jesus to jump from a height).

But the time for Jesus to die had not yet arrived. Making use of His divine power, He walked right through the crowd and went on His way. Jesus does not go elsewhere because He rejected the people of Nazareth. Rather, the people reject Him because of His implied announcement that He is going elsewhere. Later, the people of Capernaum had the same reaction when Jesus left their presence; they tried to keep Him for themselves (4:42). The response of Jesus: *"I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent."*

This story of the rejection in Nazareth is a preview of a whole series of rejections that Jesus would experience. *"He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him"* (John 1:11). The stubborn self-centeredness and pride of people continues to resist the good news of the kingdom of God. Only the power of the Spirit through the Word of God overcomes this resistance and leads to faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour.