

4th Wednesday of Ordinary Time Year B

In South Africa we are very keen on foreign things – so long as they come from the ‘developed’ or ‘industrialised’ world. We like new music, new fashions, new movies. “Foreign” is always better. We have a love affair with foreign technology – phones, cars, computers, tablets, whatever.

If something comes from *close to home*, then it is not always welcome or appreciated. I think that’s our deep problem with Xenophobia: We are hostile to people from other African countries, because they are perceived to be too close to us, not different enough, taking what rightfully belongs to struggling South Africans: our jobs, our wives, our business and educational opportunities. We don’t like to see our brothers and sisters getting too far ahead. Xenophobia applies only to people who are not foreign enough.

But put an African American in a position, and we love him to bits (I have seen this with the CEO of SAA, and the head of SAC.) Or bring a speaker from Europe, and we all flock to hear what she has to say - even if she reads the telephone directory. Have a South African computer, and we are instantly critical. Bring a Korean computer and it’s the next ‘must-have’ thing. We spend hours and hours watching the Bundesliga or Euefa Cup or the PSL, but many of us don’t support a local team.

Maybe this is part of what’s going on in Jesus’ life today. He returns to his ‘native place.’ People want novelty. They are sceptical that a son of their soil – can have anything new to say at synagogue on the sabbath: “We all know him, and his brothers and sisters.” We know what he’s going to say. He spent his life making furniture, not immersed in the Torah. His brothers and sisters are just ordinary Nazarenes. They had their minds made up against him before he could even open his mouth. They are astonished when they hear him. They take offense at him – not at what he says. If their arguments are against Jesus, they are *ad hominem* arguments, not *ad substantiam*. We aren’t even told what he said. This doesn’t matter.

The consequence is that he was disempowered. He couldn’t perform any mighty deeds there. Their lack of faith, lack of openness to him meant that they were unable to see anything that he might say as pointing to God or to a greater truth.

The same applies in South Africa. We don’t allow our sons or brothers, our mothers or sisters, to be truly great, to rise above mediocrity, to attain great status in our eyes. (Apart from Nelson Mandela, and Desmond Tutu, who were there when we were desperate for heroes.) We emasculate one another, not expecting greatness, and therefore not allowing greatness to show. In South Africa, we have been forced to face our prejudices, to name them, to come to terms with them and to overcome them. It is not easy.

And I am sure South Africa is not unique in this respect on the continent. We cut each other down to size – our size – and not allow them to be fully themselves. We know already, before we read a paper, by one of our famous professors or one of our students, what will be in there. Sometimes we have already evaluated it before we even read it. We switch off when one of our fellow students is presenting in class.

We are all guilty of prejudice – and worst of all when it is prejudice against ourselves - the people with whom we identify most closely. And they are not able to work mighty deeds in our sight. In limiting our expectations, we limit what we can receive from God. We are not open to miracles that other people can perform or bring to us. Because God works through people. God uses ordinary Kenyans, South Africans, Madagascans, to do the extraordinary. God always uses human agents. If we block these agents, we are blocking God.

We expect great things of our deacons who will be ordained on Saturday. Please let us allow them to be prophets to us. Allow them to speak to us words of wonder and wisdom. Let us not be too critical of what we hear each other say in class. There might be some gems there that we miss because we are not expecting them. Let us be serious about our prejudices – ethnicity – colour – religion – and examine them seriously. Let us not be cynical or bored with our brothers and sisters. Allow them to spread their wings, rather than being stuck in little pigeon-holes that we create for them.

This is the only way we can be open to what God is saying in our world.