

## Homily Third Sunday in Ordinary time cycle C

I am your servant Navi, son of Shillem. May God give you rain from the heavens and from the fertile earth an abundance of grain and wine.

Deacon Peter invited me to address you this evening because I was an eyewitness to the events which he read to you just a moment ago and there is so much more to tell you about them.

As I have said, I am Navi, the only son of Shillem - may he rest in peace with his ancestors. I am a shepherd by day, a student of the Torah by night. Rabbi Shemuel says that I am the most unusual student of the law in our little synagogue in Nazareth. Pure flattery on his part, no doubt, but . . . Who am I to argue with the rabbi?

I was sitting in my usual place of honor that Sabbath morning, in the 10<sup>th</sup> row. I was behind those who have a little money and influence in our town and I was in front of those who have neither. My son was beside me; my children, wife and mother in their places behind the screen in the back. The room was nearly full and the air was already heavy and warm. There was some soft coughing and scratching and a rustling of feet as we waited.

The service began when Rabbi Shemuel entered quietly. We stood and sung a psalm to the Lord. It was led by Moshe who, truth be told, cannot sing very well at all but he is the nephew of the rabbi and he was willing to do it. After the psalm we prayed the Shema and the 18 Benedictions. We sat down on our wooden benches for the reading from the Torah. We read the entire Torah in the synagogue over a 3 year period and it was early in the cycle. A young man bar mizvahed only three years ago slowly read a portion of the story of Joseph which is at the end of the book you call in English Genesis. The young man finished and rolled up the Torah scroll. He handed it to the rabbi who returned it to its place of honor.

The rabbi took the scroll of the Neviim, the prophets to you folks, and he moved to front and center of the congregation. He called up Jesus to choose a reading and give a short sermon.

Jesus was three years older than me. A carpenter when he could get any paying work. Like me he had established a reputation as a great student of the Law. Though Nazareth is a very small village our paths rarely crossed. I

take my sheep out into the hills from the east, he lives on the west side. I am able to study in the synagogue only at night, he went often during the day to read, study, debate the fine points. An advantage I suppose reserved to those who are in business for themselves. At any rate: I knew him, he knew me.

Jesus rose that morning from his seat and walked up to the rabbi. He took the scroll and unrolled it to a place at the end of the writings of the prophet Isaiah. He read a passage with such authority and passion in his voice that the entire synagogue had its eyes glued on to him, the words he spoke echoing in their ears and minds. It was as if the great prophet himself was standing among us. He finished and handed the scroll to another to be put away. He sat down to preach. Everyone leaned forward expectantly. Even the children were quiet.

“Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” He said it quietly and confidently. It was as if a bolt of lightning and clap of thunder had rocked the room.

I glanced over my shoulder to see old Reuben leaning against the wall, in the very last row which was two rows behind me. With his crippled leg he had not been able to work at all for more than 30 years. He begged alongside the road, hoping that travelers would have mercy on him and give him a penny or a scrap of bread. The terrible fact is - our whole village is poor. Reuben is very, very poor. Reuben seemed agitated. Isaiah's glad tidings for the poor meant that Reuben, all of us really, wouldn't have to scrape our livings out of the rock hard land the way we do now. The messiah would come to rebuild Jerusalem - there would be good jobs for everyone who could work! People would come from all over the world to worship and pay honor and spend their money. The messiah would distribute the wealth to all the people so that even Reuben would have a comfortable place to sleep and enough to eat every day. It was a tantalizing dream. Really, it was a dream that hurt more than it excited - it called our attention to our poverty and our pain. 500 years we have been waiting for this messiah, this golden age. Jesus says it has arrived but Reuben and we are sceptical.

I heard a gasp from a woman behind the screen. Sarah who is married to Simon Bar Simon. He was in prison in Caesaria because he was unable to pay his debts. He borrowed to buy seed three years ago. When heavier than

normal rains came that spring it washed them away before they had taken root. What little grew that year could not have fed a mouse. Simon was taken to prison and the family thrown off the land. We do what we can to help them survive but we are all so poor! The interest on his loan keeps growing and we have no way to help them pay it off. Isaiah's 'liberty to captives and release of the imprisoned' would set Simon free and bring his family together. I can see through a tear in the screen that Sarah has put her hands over the ears of her oldest child to keep him from hearing these words and raising his hopes of ever seeing his father again. Jesus says that the time has come but Sarah is too exhausted to hope and too burdened by her anguish to believe him.

I watched the rabbi react to Jesus. There was a fire in his eyes for a moment as he dreamed of the spiritual renewal that would come with the messiah. It dimmed a bit as he looked out over us and our shabby little gathering place. The messiah would bring renewed zeal for the Torah among our people, respect for Jerusalem and the Temple around the world. For the first time since we had been given the Law all would hear it, know it, obey it, love it. He had been disappointed so many times in his life as our spiritual leader but still he responded to Jesus with interest. He looked as though he would ask Jesus a question but Jesus didn't see him.

Jesus actually flinched as the people recoiled from his words. The wave of hope which had surged through us with the reading of Isaiah just ebbed away. Jesus grew angry then. "A prophet is always without honor in his home country" he said. He gave examples from the scriptures. Each one made us seem no better than the pagans! Now the congregation grew angry. Some stood up and shouted at Jesus, drowning out his remaining words. A few rowdy fellows pulled him out of the synagogue, down the street and over to the cliff that overlooks the valley nearby. They were actually going to throw him over! I can see that you are horrified by the idea, but before you judge them, think - has it not happened to you? When you proclaim the good news to the poor, the blind, the oppressed, the imprisoned, as I am sure that you do, don't they sometimes react the same way? Some times they are open, sometimes angry, other times they are wary - as if they had heard these promises too many times before. But, I digress. As they neared the edge they slowed down, and they grew ashamed. They let him go. That very day he left Nazareth, never to return.

I was very disturbed by these events. I recalled the proverb “Whoever listens closely to the word finds happiness; whoever trusts the LORD our God is blessed.”. I made up my mind that night that I would watch closely for signs that the Messiah had come and things were changing. I was not ready to become a follower of Jesus - he already had 15 or 20 people trailing behind him. But I would keep a watchful eye on him and see what happened. Deacon Peter says I can come back from time to time to tell you some of the things I ended up seeing.

Shalom. I am your humble servant Navi, son of Shillem. Shalom.