

## **You Can't Go Home Again**

*Scripture: Luke 4:14-21 "When he came to Nazareth, where he was brought up." (Luke 4:16)*

Let me confess that I am entranced by this verse. Our image of Jesus is usually so overwhelming, so encrusted with time and the power of his being. We think of him through the concept of godlike qualities. His miracles, his tenderness, his prophetic words, and then the awesome moments of redeeming power on the cross, these all enchant us away from a human figure, Yet these few words bring to us the very humanity of Jesus.

Yes, Jesus was a child, yes he was a teenager, yes he was an apprentice to a carpenter, his father, and was clearly very close to his mother. All these things seep through into our consciousness when we read this throwaway verse. When he came back to Nazareth, where he had been brought up.

This got me to thinking. What must it have been like going back home again? That is a human experience that many of us have been through, I am sure. Returning home after four years in the Air Force, two of them abroad in the Far East, was quite a momentous occasion for me. And I am sure you have had the same experience. Returning home seemed to be a return to a sacred part of earth. A part of the world that should not have changed and which gave to me a moment of retreat into a past of special memories and feelings. The ties with home had not been broken by distance and absence, through what I failed to recognize was that life had continued during that absence.

I suppose what one is most conscious of on such a return is the depth of one's debt to the past, to one's attachment to home. We have noticed before in the last few weeks how Jesus seemed to have a very secure relationship with his mother, and his mother a very secure relationship with him. This seems to tell of a secure home life. One in which Jesus seems to have been known and accepted for what he was. Mother seems never to be surprised by her son. So His return home was a return to the place where he could feel the support of his family. The family is where he had been given the physical and psychological support that must have meant so much to him. The kind of support that is essential for us as we grow up into adults.

Here in Nazareth he received the food, clothing and the shelter that was the basis of his physical nurturing. One must assume that it was with the family that he also received the kind of supportive relationships that nurtured him in more important ways also.

Here at home he was also given a task to fulfill. He was trained to be a carpenter. He was given a trade, an occupation, and a means of earning a living. And above all he was given a place in which to grow. All these things must have gone through his mind as he returned to his home where he had been brought up. His upbringing was not magical, nor was it supernatural. Jesus did not come to us like some heavenly being – he was brought up in Nazareth, and his return to Nazareth was a return home. He must have been aware on his return of his debt to the family, to his father and his mother.

It is interesting, and then to see what it was that he did when he returned home. He went to the Synagogue, there to speak to the elders of his village whom he must have known while he was growing up. Jesus knew where his religious and intellectual debts lay. His reading was from the prophet Isaiah. It was not to some strange and exotic work filled with mystic and magical newness. It was not a hip and trendy religious message that he preached to them. Jesus

was no Californian “New Age” prophet giving the faddish and popular current religious craze. Jesus knew his debt to the past and he returned to the prophet Isaiah just as he returned to this home. The Hebrew religion was to him his religious and intellectual home. And he would return to that in the same way as he would return home, recognizing there the depth of understanding, which moved him, further in his knowledge of God. Jesus was at home in the Synagogue, he was at home with the scripture. One has the feeling that here in Nazareth he had found shape to his life, and in the scriptures and the worship around him he found he could make sense out of life.

Isn't this what home does for us? In our home and in our church we find the security and the stories that give sense to our lives. Religion is not simply a sideline; a thing that one attends to in the occasions of life when something special is called for. It is not the civil ceremony, the occasional blesser of happy occasions and healer of the sad. For Jesus this religion of his youth was his life. If he had a quarrel with those about him it was that they did not take it as seriously as he did.

Jesus was shaped by the tradition in which he was brought up. It nourished his life and gave him the means of understanding what was going on around him. Life was more than the day-to-day struggle for existence, because of his having been saturated with the power of the religious past of his people. You and I can have that same strength and power of life if only we would look at this tradition that was supported by the structure of our lives. We are who we are because of this tradition and because of the profound meaning that it has given to living. Without it we are as nothing. Can we live without looking back at the past, our own past, the past of our fathers and mothers, and making that past a part of ourselves. The problem with so much of what passes for religion in these days is that the new and trendy has taken over and shallowness becomes so apparent.

I was in a favorite bookstore the other day – one of those small bookstores that have almost totally disappeared these days – and I was looking at their somewhat idiosyncratic choice of books not looking for anything in particular, but they always have some interesting choices. As I wandered around I came upon the section called “Religion and Philosophy.” Two subjects that are dear to my heart. I thought that here I would find some solace for my soul and intellect, some ideas to stoke up the imagination for some Sunday sermon. What I found was this: out of all the books on Religion and Philosophy on ten shelves there were five Bibles, one book on a Western Philosopher and one book of Christian meditations. All the rest were on Zen, Witchcraft, Astrology, Eastern Religion, and New Age mysticism. What this told me was that Christianity would not now really be thought of as significant enough to consider selling books. There were no Christian classics, no contemporary theological works, no works of Christian mysticism, and no works on Christian devotion.

We are fast losing our sense of tradition and what is more we are beginning to lose our identity. Amongst the books on the shelf most were books on self-improvement, astrology, secular meditation and philosophies of self-transcendence. The moment is one of withdrawal from who we are to an inner uncertainty about the self. We no longer look to the past, nor do we look to a future, we look only to uncertainty.

Jesus knew who he was and he knew where he came from. But there is something about that return to where he had been brought up that is also important for us to understand. In going back to one's scenes of childhood and youth one realizes that there is change both in the home

and in oneself. Things have a different look about them. There is something about that return that signals the change in the self. One is aware of the comfort and the security of the home, but one also recognizes that “you can't go home again.” There is simply no going back in time to another time and another place.

Jesus speaks to us out of a tradition of the Hebrews, but in so speaking he moves out of that tradition into the world, and there embraces all of mankind. He speaks not only of these who are within the fold, but also of those who are desperate and lonely. There is in this Jesus a new understanding of God, not as God of a few, but the creator of all mankind, and therefore for all mankind. The world is the home for Jesus now. All mankind is his mother and his father, and his brother and sister.

The shock of recognition that we have in going home is the shock of seeing that we have grown, that we have changed and developed. However much we love and cherish the traditions of the past, we have to appropriate them for ourselves, make them our own and take them into ourselves and in the process make them ours. We love that secure home, but we know that we have to launch out into our own experience and life.

For Jesus the change was momentous and changed the whole of history. But he still felt that he was true to his tradition and his own past. He brought to us a new life and a new hope because he took upon himself the truth of the tradition of the past, the truth that God created all people and loved all of his creatures. In committing himself to that truth he showed God to us. What this shows to us is that if we are to live fully we too have to take the truth of that fully into our own lives, and with that truth to seek for ourselves an understanding of everything that happens in its light. What Jesus brought back to his home was the vision of a new life based on that insight; that his task was God's work amongst the poor, the needy, the destitute, the outcasts of the world. In so doing he brought a new life to all of mankind. What he did was to bring God into our very midst and made it impossible any more to avoid the challenge of love in our lives.

The other funny thing about his going home was that the people who knew him as the son of Mary and Joseph could not see him for himself. They could not accept this message, they could only see the little child growing up in their midst. “This is Joseph's son.” We in our own way also want to lessen his impact upon our lives. The challenge to us is too great and we are afraid of the consequences of taking up his challenge. Meeting God in the demands of the world is not an easy task, and it is so much easier to look into ourselves and cultivate the garden of our own heart. But the heart without the love of God is barren soil and cultivation leads only to more barrenness and desolation.

It is so easy for us to deal with his claims upon us by seeing him as just another prophet, just another religious fanatic and thus to demean him. Or in a more benign way we can just see him as the nice boy who lived down the street. Joseph's son came home with tall tales and funny ways. We can demean his message through our very familiarity with it. We are comfortable where we are and do not need to be shaken out of our present comfortable home. The person who has remained comfortable at home often has not grown beyond the confines of the past and is not really aware of the present and all that it holds, let alone being aware of the future and its possibilities.

We need to grow, and to grow we need the challenge given to us in the truth that emerges from all we know and see in this man Jesus. We must be careful that we do not reduce this gospel of love by making his demand of love into nothing more than an empty and hollow

feeling we can comfortably keep to ourselves. Is this only Joseph's son who challenges us? No! It is the Son of God, and he speaks of God himself.

We must take this message into ourselves, understanding that it challenges us to grow into new beings and throwing us into a new life.

Holy Spirit, Truth divine,  
Dawn upon this soul of mine;  
Word of God, and inward light,  
Wake my spirit, clear my sight.

If home is where we look for comfort and security in a nostalgic past with only memories to give direction for our lives, then having encountered this powerful gospel of Jesus we simply cannot go home again. We have to take upon ourselves the challenge of a life lived towards a future with his demand of love as our guide. But we know that although the future may be uncharted and difficult, that spirit of love has entered into our hearts and gives new light and a new possibility for life.

Sermon preached at the First Baptist Church, Hamilton, NY  
January 24<sup>th</sup> 2009 -- John S. Morris, Interim Pastor.