

Welcome, everyone, as we gather to celebrate this Eucharist. I especially want to welcome any visitors we have with us here today, those who are here for the first time, and those who are here for the first time in a long time. We're not really concerned about what path you've walked that has brought you here today; we simply rejoice that we are here together, to worship God as one people. Please know that you belong here, and are always welcome.

Last week, we heard Jesus give his first homily in his hometown synagogue, and in that homily he told them his mission. He opened the scroll to Isaiah and read a prophecy of the time of the messiah. He rolled up the scroll, all eyes were on him, and he announced that this scripture passage had been fulfilled in their hearing. He told them that he had been anointed, sent by the Father to preach the gospel, heal the contrite of heart, give sight to the blind, and set us free from our captivity.

Today, we hear their reaction. The service ended; people went to get their coffee and doughnuts; Jesus mingled around between conversations; friends and neighbors gathered in their groups, and they all reacted to what Jesus had said. We are told that they all spoke highly of him at this point. One can imagine their conversations. *Wow, that was a bold homily. God the Father sent him to free us from captivity, like he's a new Moses. And he's going to perform miracles, like he's a new Elijah. That's exciting.* But in that same sentence, we are told, "They also asked: isn't this the son of Joseph?" *He's been around for thirty years, and we*

*haven't seen any miracles yet. How about a demonstration, let's see him back up his words with deeds. Physician, first heal thyself, if you want us to believe in your ability.*

We can understand that reaction. After all, that's what they ultimately came to see, it's what they expected. We are told that news of him had been spreading throughout Galilee, that he was teaching in their synagogues and was being praised by all. So when he comes into town, there was excitement. Of course he's going to be the one preaching at the synagogue that Sabbath. And of course, all eyes looked intently at him when he was about to speak. Finally, they too were going to witness what everyone was saying about the carpenter's son from Nazareth. It was time for Jesus to put up and get to the main event. Do for his family and friends what he was doing for everyone else.

Which is why they were so furious at his response. *You think you have a special claim on my ministry because we grew up together, that you should have certain privileges? I tell you, there were many widows among the chosen people suffering from the famine in the time of Elijah, but he didn't help any of them. There were many lepers among the chosen people in the time of Elisha, but he didn't help any of them. Learn from the scriptures. You have no standing to have such an expectation of favor from the Lord. The Father sends who He wants to whom He wants, and that is solely up to Him.*

Well, they weren't praising him anymore. They drove him out of Nazareth, led him to the brow of the hill with the intention of literally throwing him out of the city, headlong down the hill. Luke simply reports that he passed through their midst and went away.

In the past, I've preached on identifying with Jesus, that a prophet is not welcome in his hometown, and that we can expect the same when we try to witness to our family and friends. But I think we can identify with the crowd, as well. It is not uncommon for us to fall into the temptation of placing expectations on Jesus. We go to Mass regularly, or maybe even not so regularly but some. We say our prayers, usually. We are kind to our neighbors, at least as much as is reasonable to expect. We make sacrifices for the sake of our religion, we do not completely ignore what we are taught to believe and do. That's got to be worth something, right? Is it really fair for Jesus to say "no" to every petition we make, every favor for which we ask?

As hard as it can be to accept, it's absolutely fair. God does not owe us anything. He gives us many things, but not because we have been so good and deserve a reward. He gives us many things because *He* is so good and *wants* to give us His blessing. But that is completely up to Him. We can see perhaps why it was not the Father's will that Jesus give the people of Nazareth mighty signs, because it would

have fed their misguided notion that somehow Jesus owed this to them. In hindsight, from afar, we can understand this.

We cannot always see so easily why it would be the Father's will not to grant our petitions when we ask only for good things. Why *not* heal my child? Why *not* prevent some evil from happening? Why *not* remove this thorn from my side? When we are in the midst of these situations, when we fervently ask Jesus to intervene on our behalf, it's not easy to see why it might be better if he didn't. Ultimately, we fall back on our belief of God's pure goodness, of His perfect love for us, and that He knows better than we do what petitions He should grant and which ones He should not.

If that answer is unsatisfying, I get that. The problem of evil is one with which the human race has struggled since we were thrown out of the Garden of Eden. The answers the world offers to the problem of evil only lead to despair. The answer our faith gives is one that at least provides hope, that evil will not be victorious in the end. When Christ returns, all wounds will be healed, all injustices will have been atoned, creation will be redeemed from sin. But just because an answer makes sense doesn't make it easy to accept, especially while we are in the midst of unjust suffering. That will be our reality until Christ returns.

So we don't come here in order to garner favor with God. We don't do acts of charity to our neighbor in order to build up credit for when we want God to do an act of charity for us. We come here because we long for that Kingdom where all evil and suffering have come to an end. We come here because this world passes away, and Jesus alone has the words of eternal life. As we gather today, may we make a pure offering of worship and adoration, and pray that soon, God's kingdom will come.