

SERMON
24 OCTOBER 2010
BIBLE SUNDAY

Today is Bible Sunday. And I want to cheat a little with that theme. Because I want to talk to you this morning about the Fifth Gospel, and as you know, there are only four.

The Fifth Gospel is the name given by Christians to the Holy Land because they say, visiting it sheds so much light on the other four Gospels. And, my golly, it does.

I spent 12 days in Israel back in June and first and foremost I want to thank all of you who contributed so generously to that trip around the time of Gaby and myself getting married. (In case anybody doesn't know, Gaby is an Israeli citizen and wanted to show me her country.)

I'd have to say it was the most interesting holiday I've ever had. I felt very at home in Israel which is a beautiful country. I am enormously privileged to be able to see Israel from the inside because I have a ready-made family and circle of friends there. The family and some of the friends are in Tel Aviv where we began the trip and we then went to Jerusalem where we have more friends. From there, we went to Qumran, home of the Dead Sea scrolls, then to the Dead Sea itself. After that, it was off to Galilee, followed by what used to be called Caesarea Philippi. Last came a stay in Haifa with yet more friends, via a day in Nazareth – the setting for today's Gospel story. I expect I'll keep dropping details of all those places into sermons in times to come. It's certainly not possible to cover all of it in one sermon so for today I'll stick with Nazareth.

Nazareth these days is a largely Arab town where tensions can run high and provocative anti-Christian slogans can be seen in one or two places – aimed at the 35% of Arab Christians who live there, as well as at foreign pilgrims. We had a Christian Arab guide who did the whole tour in French! In Jesus' day, Nazareth was very different from now because it was totally insignificant. Perhaps only a few hundred people lived there and certainly no more than a thousand. That explains the wry question of Nathaniel in John's Gospel when he hears that Jesus comes from Nazareth. He says, 'Nazareth! Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'

But for the purposes of Jesus' parents, Joseph and Mary, Nazareth would have been an ideal place to raise their son. The Bible talks of a violent search being made further South in Judea for this special child at His birth. And this tiny village nestling in the hills of Galilee was under different jurisdiction and would have been a perfect place to keep Jesus – below the radar. But paradoxically it would also have exposed Jesus to a much wider worldview. Up on a hillside there, this young boy would have looked down on a major trade route linking Galilee to Syria up in the North and to Egypt and the Mediterranean in the South and West. It was called the Via Maris – The Way of the Sea and it was full of Gentiles – hence the title: 'Galilee of the Gentiles' that we hear referred to in readings every Christmas. So Nazareth was not far from a major communications network. And later Jesus would shift his base to Capernaum (Kfar Nahum) which was right on that network, right on the way of the sea.

One of the most fascinating bits of Nazareth is a replica first century village built on the site of a real first century village. Your tour begins indoors in a darkened room and you're told, 'when you walk through that door, you'll be back in the first century.' And so you are. As you emerge into the brilliant sunlight, you are in the middle of a Palestinian village, complete with peasants in costumes and sheep – all just as it would have been 2000 years ago.

You see a huge round threshing floor where a donkey pulls a moving board to separate seeds of wheat and barley from chaff. You see a vineyard which reminds you of Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants where a man plants a vineyard, builds a wall round it, digs a wine press in it and constructs a watch tower overlooking the vineyard. And there it all is - the wall, the wine press, the tower. It all comes to life.

There's also an indoor olive press, used to grind and crush olives to make olive oil. Having just visited Gethsemane in Jerusalem, I couldn't help thinking of that place because Gethsemane itself means 'oil press.' And the huge stone crushing the olives in Nazareth was a powerful symbol of Jesus in Gethsemane, being crushed beneath the weight of his forthcoming trial, torture and crucifixion – to the point where thinking about it made him drip sweat like great

drops of blood – again reminiscent of olive oil. Perhaps it's no accident that Jesus chose a place called 'the oil press' for his last night alive.

What else is there in the first century village? Well, there's also a carpenter's shop complete with carpenter. What struck me was how modern the tools looked – planes, chisels, even a string – powered drill. Part of Jesus' job would have been to make ploughs, yokes and those threshing boards I mentioned and also to repair stuff. But the interesting thing is that the Biblical word 'tehton' which we have translated as carpenter, doesn't actually mean 'carpenter.' It means 'builder' - and that includes stone working. Because only one person would have build a house, for example and that would have meant stone walls, as well as wooden structures. And also Jesus uses more 'building' language – towers, foundations of houses on rock and so forth.

But where the replica Nazareth village really links up with today's Gospel passage is in the Synagogue they've built there - as always out of first century materials. In Jesus' day the synagogues were the largest buildings in a village with gabled tiled roofs that made them stand out from the flat clay roofs of the other buildings round them. The synagogue with its benches round the walls was a general place of assembly which would have included use as a school. (Jesus would have gone to school till the age of 12) to study the Torah – the Law of Moses).

In today's Gospel, Jesus has temporarily left his new Headquarters at Capernaum to visit his old home town and to read and talk in the synagogue. While reading, He would have stood on a wooden dais in the middle of the room. While talking, He would have sat on the seat reserved for the teacher.

You would have heard a pin drop when He chose to read a passage from Isaiah 61 which spoke of the mission of the Lord's long-awaited 'Anointed One' – bringing good news to the poor, release for captives, recovery of sight to the blind and so on. You'd have heard a pin drop because this local boy then proceeded to apply the passage to Himself. That was astounding enough but what really set the room alight was when Jesus went on to tell this Jewish community that God's long awaited blessing was going to include Gentiles like Naaman the Syrian (about whom Ann was preaching the other week.) Israel's God was going to rescue the wrong people. In several Jewish texts of the time, there was a longing for God to bring down destruction on the wicked nations. What Jesus was now saying was like someone in the Britain or France of 1941 talking about God's healing and restoration of Adolf Hitler.

No surprise, then, that Jesus's words trigger a violent response from his listeners. Then try to throw Him off a cliff – the punishment for blasphemy. Incidentally, tour guides will still take you to what they claim is the actual cliff.

So Jesus's message was that God's plan was to bless all the nations of the earth through Israel. It was a reminder of the old promise to Abraham. And Jesus would go on to warn his countrymen that unless they understood this and abandoned their dreams of military victory over their national enemies, they would suffer defeat at every level – military, political and theological.

But this massive plan to bring all the nations of the world into a relationship with the God of Israel would enter it's critical phase beginning in the obscure backwater of Nazareth. It would have seemed ridiculous then. 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' To many it seems ridiculous now.

We are living in a time of change when the previous indifference of British society to Christianity is being replaced by ridicule and hostility – what the Pope rightly called 'aggressive secularism'. We are living in a time when people will look everywhere for philosophies to live by – except right in their own backyard, with their own Christian inheritance. Christianity is now increasingly the prophet who is not accepted in his own home town.

But notice one thing. When Jesus was taken to the cliff edge in Nazareth to be thrown off, the Gospel says strangely that 'He passed through the midst of them and went on His way.' How could that have happened in the middle of a mob? I asked the question to the official guide at the Nazareth village and he replied that, in his view it was Jesus' sheer presence that stopped them all in their tracks.

Despite the current quite vicious trends in our country, one day, we don't know when, and in some way, we don't know how, that same immense presence will once again stop people dead in their tracks. The God of Israel's promise to bring all the nations of the world into a relationship with Him will not be thwarted. Amen

