

This morning I would like to consider the nature of expectation...

Do you thrive under the weight of high expectation or shrink away. Most people I suspect would rather have to meet low expectations and then try and impress by over delivering. I had to introduce a keynote speaker last week at an industry event and massively “bigged” him up before welcoming him up on stage. I made him sound like the finest speaker they would ever hear with the most fabulous insights and witty stories... as he came up, he looked absolutely terrified and flashed me a look that simply said “you sausage” or words to that effect and I felt genuinely sorry for him. But what was I meant to say, “here’s someone who could be mildly interesting and if you’re patient and forgiving you might just get something worthwhile from what is likely to be a pretty average speech”.

Kia did exactly the same to me when she told me what two readings we were having this morning. “OMG, she said, what fabulous readings, so rich in content and so significant” with the obvious implication that being so blessed to have these texts, much will be expected from my talk. So I’m going to talk about Job instead... only joking.

Let’s look at the Gospel reading first and see what us mere mortals can learn from it. It is the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, having just returned to Galilee from the wilderness, where he overcame his temptations. He's filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, keen to get started on his mission which leads him to teach in the synagogues, where he performs what can only be described as the perfect “mic drop”!

Can you imagine what the Nazareth community must have thought. Jesus gets up and reads the following passage from Isaiah “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” The passage continues with ““Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him (you can feel the tension can’t you and then he says) “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” Boom. Who the hell does he think he is? Jesus has just proclaimed that he has "fulfilled" scripture, meaning he's accomplished something with lasting effects. He's the Messiah, the deliverer, and the fulfilment of goodness and love. Talk about raising expectation, even I couldn’t big him up any more than that.

Unsurprisingly, we know that the crowd in Jesus's hometown initially reacts with amazement and approval, but later this turns to outrage and murderous intent. It is in the following verses that we get the wonderfully true saying “a prophet is never recognised in his own country”

I'm the middle son of three boys born in consecutive years. And to say we were competitive is an understatement. Those childhood years are littered with smashed up monopoly boards, darts embedded in legs (and on one occasion in my head), air rifle pellet bruises and dashed egos. My father used to call it rough and tumble and my mother used to call it unbearable. We knew no different so just kept on winding each other up. We were pretty well churched and the saying "a prophet is never recognised in his own country", was often used to explain our dynamic. Whenever somebody praised my brothers or thought they were a bit special, I took it upon myself to dispel that myth. It was my right and duty as their brother, I knew them better and couldn't allow them to be "special" or get ideas above their station. You'll be pleased to know they extended the same courtesy to me. And so it was with Jesus, they knew him.

So, as we move through life, we shy away from blowing our own trumpet, we become wary of high expectations, most of us learn to love and adopt humility and abhor arrogance, especially in this country. The idea of standing up and saying "I am really uniquely special", like Jesus did, fills us with horror, terrified that people will say "who the hell does he think he is". But in the first reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul tells us that we are all really special, in fact he tells us that we are essential to the "body of Christ" and that no one part is more valuable than another, v25 "there should be no division in the body.....its parts should have equal concern for each other". But unfortunately, we fall into that terrible trap of "judging". We get very good at adopting the "oh, I don't have any great gifts or talents" interestingly, we also get really adept at the "but you on the other hand, you're simply brilliant at X or Y or Z". I wonder whether this is not a little bit naughty and maybe a little bit cruel because you could read these same statements as "well I haven't been blessed with any great gifts or talents so very little is expected of me, whilst you on the other hand, are mightily blessed and we are expecting great things from you". Is this apparent humility a way of removing or diminishing our responsibility to use the gifts we have been given?

And, unless they are your brothers, why do we seem to value the gifts of others so much more than our own? Is it because our gifts come naturally to us and are simple to perform therefore we attach less value to them (But isn't that what makes them gifts?) In contrast, when we see talents that we don't have in others, we rate them higher. I cannot sing for toffee or play an instrument, so I place great value on those that can.

Perhaps a good place for us to start would be to honestly and without false modesty, recognise our own God given gifts. Have we ever genuinely attempted this? Let me leave you with a mic drop challenge. In the film, Chariots of fire Eric Liddell says "When I run, I feel God's pleasure", can we remove the word "run" and put in our own gift... In other words, fill in the blank "when I I feel God's pleasure"