

Sermon For Sunday July 8th 2018

Ezekiel 2:1-5

2 He said to me, “Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you.”² As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.

³ He said: “Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have been in revolt against me to this very day.⁴ The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says.’⁵ And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious people—they will know that a prophet has been among them.

Mark 6:1-13 (NIV)

6 Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples.² When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. “Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What’s this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing?”³ Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.⁴ Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home.”⁵ He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them.⁶ He was amazed at their lack of faith.

Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village.⁷ Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits.⁸ These were his instructions: “Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts.⁹ Wear sandals but not an extra shirt.¹⁰ Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town.¹¹ And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”¹² They went out and preached that people should repent.¹³ They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

“Familiarity Breeds Contempt”

I am told most preachers can remember the first time they stood up to preach in front of their parents! Unlike being a musician or a sports person, preaching is different, since it is likely parents encouraged those other activities from childhood. Perhaps it is because something is emerging *publicly* that has, up until then, been quite *private*. Parents and close friends are likely to be a bit vulnerable and wonder *what* will be said and *how* everyone will react. Imagine how *you* might feel if it was *your* son or daughter up here in this, your home church, preaching in front of all your friends! I confess have yet to face that moment, although my mother has certainly told me what she thinks about my books!

Furthermore, in the case of Jesus, the presumed *content* of his message¹ would have been viewed as radical to *any* Jew, let alone those from his home town, and this would significantly compound the problem. We have *already* seen in Mark’s gospel that Jesus’ family had tried to intervene in his ministry at Capernaum, thinking him to be deranged.² We are therefore left with the distinct impression that they were embarrassed and regarded him as bringing shame on the family name. At this point in Mark’s gospel there every indication Jesus’ family have rejected his message, although it is reasonable to assume Mark’s *readers* knew that Jesus’ brother, James, eventually became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, our gospel reading today begins in Nazareth, the town where Jesus was raised. Jesus was there with his twelve disciples and he began by teaching in the synagogue, just as he did in Capernaum.

Mark tells us *nothing* about what Jesus taught, only the reaction of the town’s folk.³ They knew Jesus was a “manual” worker, and it seems they had a mocking attitude towards those who undertake such tasks, implying that they were uneducated.⁴ But there was more to it than that; *familiarity*, not merely elitist prejudice against blue-collar workers, was a key factor in their rejection. “Where did *this man* get these things?” they asked. “What’s this wisdom that has been given *him*? What are these remarkable miracles *he* is performing?”⁵ Consequently, it is *this* particular laborer who is rejected; in their eyes they may have thought this carpenter⁶ was attempting to elevate his status above that to

¹ Namely, that God is doing a new thing and everyone needs to wake up and pay attention!

² Mark 3:21.

³ Luke’s account is much expanded; see Luke 4:14-30.

⁴ Some of Mark’s readers would be sophisticated Greeks and they generally disdained manual workers and could not grasp the idea of a laborer who could teach with authority.

⁵ Mark 6:2.

⁶ The Greek word for “carpenter” is more than a “joiner,” it refers to a “craftsman.” However, this does not mean an elite, fine woodworker, rather someone who could set his hand to *any* wood-related job. Jesus is working man, and because of that the people despised him. (Since Galilee was prosperous during this period, Jesus and his family were not impoverished tenant farmers or day laborers. But his status as a local craftsman would have been considerably lower than that of a member of an *educated* class, e.g., religious leaders who were therefore presumed to be “wise”.)

which he was entitled by birth. To the townspeople, Jesus was merely, “Mary’s boy from down the street.”⁷

Jesus responds to the people’s contempt and jealousy by quoting a well-known proverb: “A prophet is not without honor except in his own town.”⁸ According to Mark, Jesus adds two clauses to that proverb, namely: “among his *relatives*” and “in their own *home*.” Mark makes it clear that Jesus had barely begun his ministry and he had already been rejected by the religious leaders,⁹ by his family, and now by his hometown. He had come back to Nazareth as a Rabbi and he was rejected as one. And the disciples *witnessed* all this; no doubt this was a sober lesson that would prepare them for their own later experiences of rejection - and that of the post-Easter church, including Mark’s readers.

Many people are surprised by this story. They think that the people who would have known Jesus the best should have been the first to follow him. Instead, we read it was the human ordinariness of Jesus that proved a stumbling block to belief. They could not get beyond the fact he was a carpenter; how could this familiar tradesman do such astonishing things? The irony is that Mark presents the demons as knowing the true identity of Jesus, but willful blindness to what God was doing in Jesus is always a formidable obstacle to faith. And today, many struggle to believe in Jesus for similar reasons. Many dismiss the miracles as myth, and therefore see Jesus as simply an ordinary person, just like they did in Nazareth; at best he was a good, wise man who was killed – end of story! But that is not Mark’s conviction, nor mine!

In an atmosphere of such skepticism Jesus, we are told, could do no miracles there.¹⁰ (Although Mark does qualify that statement with, “except lay his hands on a few sick people and healed them.”) The people reject *the person* of Jesus, so they reject *both* his message and his miracles; his wisdom *and* his power. Then Mark adds an ironic twist, “Jesus was *amazed* at *their* lack of faith.”¹¹ There is a mysterious connection between healing and faith. The lack of it, it seems, seriously hinders Jesus’ power. I suspect a key factor is that the people of Nazareth were seeking miracles for their own sake, as “proof,” and hence their motivations were not holy or gracious.¹² Then as now, witnessing a miracle does not necessarily result in increased faith; people will often try to explain *away* such an

⁷ Jesus is referred to as Joseph’s son in Luke 4:22; see also Matt 13:55. This reference to “Mary’s son” can be interpreted in various ways. Some have plausibly suggested that this implies Joseph was already dead. It is often assumed that Jesus, as the eldest son, took upon himself to support his mother, brothers and sisters in the family business until they were old enough to fend for themselves, at which point he then began his ministry. It is possible that the crowd intended it as an insult, implying that by having such “wisdom” he must be the offspring of someone other than his father, Joseph. Keeping it simple, speaking of Jesus as Mary’s son merely designates him as someone who is well-known in Nazareth. Incidentally, the naming of four brothers (James, Joseph, Judas and Simon) and several (unnamed) sisters makes it clear that Mark understood Jesus as having biological siblings. In the context of Mark, then, Mary’s having other children makes nonsense of the belief of perpetual virginity of Mary, unless they were step-children of Joseph from a former marriage!

⁸ Mark 6:4.

⁹ Mark 3:6.

¹⁰ Mark 6:5. Matt 13:58 uses the words “did not,” rather than “could not.”

¹¹ Mark 6:6. Perhaps this is a literary echo of the people’s astonishment concerning Jesus, see Mark 6:2.

¹² See also Luke 4:23. It is reasonable to assume they wanted Jesus to repeat in Nazareth the “signs” he did in Capernaum.

occurrence. In other words, the negative atmosphere was all so twisted and distorted that it inhibited the Spirit's work; this happens today within the church and the broader community. And it raises some questions, such as: "How might our preconceived ideas about the ways God works today shutout his wisdom and power from being manifest among us?" And it forces us to consider *our* response to the question, "Exactly *who is this Jesus?*" The good news, however, is just as Jesus' brother, James, was rebelling against the gospel at this point in his life, within 30 years his name would be known throughout the Roman world as someone who was loyal to his older brother, Jesus the Messiah. This should be a source of hope and encouragement to keep praying for our children.

Mark moves on at this point of his gospel and Jesus launches a new phase in his ministry. He begins by commissioning the disciples to *participate* in his mission. This sending of the twelve should *not* been seen as them going to the non-Jews (Gentiles), in reaction to all this Jewish rejection. Rather, Jesus is symbolically sending his 12 heralds to the tribes of Israel announcing that something new was about to happen; God's Kingdom is near! There also is a sense of urgency to their task because God's timetable is urgent, and this is reflected in breakneck pace of Mark's gospel. History, Israel's own story, was rushing towards its climax. Later, as *we* know, there would be a showdown in Jerusalem and on a hill just outside the city where Jesus was killed – *not* that the drama ends there!

Jesus sends them out with the authority to expel demons and to heal, as well as to preach the news of the kingdom with a call to repentance. They do not possess an "independent" authority; their mission is an extension of Jesus' *own* activity. And, characteristically, they are sent in pairs, both for encouragement and to act as a witness. The description of what they were allowed to take with them seems strange to us because our times and culture are so different. But the underlying *attitudes* are important and can be emulated today. Not only do these instructions add to the sense urgency and to traveling light, but it also emphasizes an attitude of *in trusting God for provision*, rather than in oneself. It also echoes the instructions of being ready on the Passover night, just prior to the exodus from Egypt.¹³ That was also a time when God rescued his people from evil and bondage, and provided for their needs in the wilderness.¹⁴ And Mark's contemporaries also knew of wandering philosophers [cynics¹⁵] and teachers [Essenes] who also traveled with few meagre belongings. The disciples were *not* to engage in preaching and healing in order to make money; that would make them subject to the charge of being religious charlatans or magicians. Moreover, in that culture, hospitality was a sacred duty; but it wasn't the stranger's responsibility to find it, rather it was the duty of the village to offer it. The disciples were instructed to stay in the first home that welcomes them, not to be on the lookout for more luxurious lodgings! And if a village refused hospitality, well, shame on them! We naturally think that "shaking off the dust off your feet" is an act of petulance or a fit of pique, even a

¹³ Exod 12:11.

¹⁴ Deut 8:4; 29:5.

¹⁵ There were a number of philosophical groups who went around the ancient world begging and teaching people. One group, called "cynics," which comes from the Greek word for "dogs," were more like vermin rather than family pets! They had a reputation of barking at the rich and respectable. Incidentally, cynics didn't think anything new was going to happen, they just bemoaned the present world as an unredeemable mess! And they didn't cast out demons!

gesture of curse. However, more likely the focus is on the urgency of mission; there's no time to waste – move on! Jesus anticipates that some places would welcome his message and others would not; this acknowledges the mysterious elements of human freewill. Even the most sophisticated and culturally sensitive presentation of the gospel can be rejected. This suggests Christians are not to waste their time and resources such circumstances, because others need to hear the “good news”!

The place and timing of Mark's gospel - its connection to the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70) - also speaks to the urgency of *his* message. Crises sharpen the mind and the mission. Of course, the greatest crisis came with the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the church has experienced all sorts of crises at various stages ever since. Part of Christian discipleship entails a spiritual sensitivity to know when there is an emergency and what steps to take.¹⁶

It is commonly known that if you place a frog in cold water and slowly heat it up, it will eventually die without realizing it. Alternatively, if you put the frog into hot water it will jump out and live. This stark, if not grotesque, comparison is – I believe - pertinent to the present state of the Western church. Is not its demise, at least in part, because we have been completely assimilated *into* our secular culture, so domesticating the radical message of Jesus? We have allowed – unwittingly perhaps – our culture to tame both the church and the gospel message. The once wild, roaring lion is now only to be found caged in a private zoo. Christians of all persuasions need to wake-up to the reality of the state of the church today. Many have; the question is what to *do* about it. Addressing that issue is much harder of course, but it must begin in asking very basic and deeply challenging questions, such as “Is what we promote as a congregation (and the wider a church) truly reflecting the reign of God?” And, “If we genuinely believe ‘Jesus is Lord,’ what difference does that make?” Or, “What does it mean, practically, to be a “disciple” of Jesus today?” Some healthy introspection is therefore in order. But today's crisis will not be solved at the level of method and problem-solving. The problem is much more deeply rooted, because the real issues are spiritual and theological.¹⁷ Having confidence in the gospel as genuine “good news” for all is crucial, but so is a deeper understanding of our Trinitarian God, who both *sends* us and *participates* with us in what is, after all, *God's* mission.

In conclusion, one lesson from a passage like this learning to listen to the prophetic call of God, *and* to the pain at the present world, and to live at the point of intersection between the two. When the call comes, there is no time to lose. Second, we all need to obediently and patiently “walk the Christian walk” – both in times of crisis and, perhaps more importantly, when things are going well. That is what being a *disciple* means – we follow *Jesus*. This is vital, because Jesus has commissioned and sent *all of us* – not just ministers and elders – on a mission of spreading the good news of forgiveness and

¹⁶ The Jubilee 2000 movement to write-off massive unpayable debts of Third World countries is one more recent example, and the Truth and Reconciliation Project in South Africa is another.

¹⁷ Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 3. He adds: “The crises are certainly many and complex: diminishing numbers, clergy burnout, the loss of youth, the end of denominational loyalty, biblical illiteracy, division in the ranks, the electronic church and its various corruptions, the irrelevance of traditional forms of worship, the loss of genuine spirituality, and widespread confusion about both the purpose and the message of the church of Jesus Christ,” 2.

wholeness in both words *and* action – *living* it out. As we talk with others in appropriate and timely ways, we must speak from *our experience*, which is, after all, all we *can* talk from! Many Christians would soon talk about *anything* other than their faith, their sex life, their salary, anything but what they believe about God! This text indicates that potential rejection or some embarrassment in telling *the story* is part of the claim Christ has on his followers. We *can*, of course, get anxious about speaking to others about our faith; many prefer to regard it purely as a private matter. If we hold to that latter view, we have misunderstood that the good news of Jesus is meant to be *public* - for everyone! Remember, in our conversations, we are not trying to persuade others to join “the church,” but simply tell others why God means so much to us. We do this out of love, not competition, or fear. We don’t have to have polished words or a perfect theology to speak about our faith. We are simply to speak what we know about Jesus from the heart, in own words and with no shame. Some will be amazed at what we share and may want to know more. Some will reject both the message and the messenger, just like those from Nazareth. We can’t help that – but we still have sowed a seed. We are not held responsible for the *response* to our ministries in Christ’s name, but only for our own faithfulness to God’s mission. Jesus commissioned his disciples in this story of a training mission; they had to begin somewhere - and they evidently had some success.¹⁸ Nevertheless, success and rejection come together in Mark’s narrative, and we should expect the same. We too are called and “sent out,” empowered by the Holy Spirit. Will we respond to that call? Let us never lose sight of the fact that the Bible is full of stories in which God uses ordinary people in extraordinary ways. Amen.

¹⁸ Mark 6:12-13, 30.