

July 7 2024 Rev Don Owers

Mark 6.1 – 13

In the good old days, by which I mean the 1950's and early 1960's, churches were booming, Sunday Schools were overflowing, new brick veneer churches and mission halls were being built all over the place - and clergy were RESPECTED! Alas those days are long gone. Today, in the mainline denominations, congregations are ageing and declining, there's a chronic shortage of clergy and we're selling off those 1950's brick veneer mission halls to raise funds to provide palliative care for declining parishes. Now, to be fair, the picture is not totally dismal! There are pockets of life here and there, but overall it's acknowledged that we seem to be trying to bring the good news of Jesus to a society that, for one reason or another, doesn't want to hear it. As Christians we appreciate immensely the sure hope we have in the risen Lord Jesus and we deeply value how the teaching of Jesus informs our lives and, in the power of the Holy Spirit, reshapes our lives. But if we try to share this good news with others, even friends and family, it seems that, more often than not, they just don't want to know.

If you're puzzled and frustrated about this, today's gospel reading is for you! In that passage Mark records that, having exercised a very effective ministry of teaching and healing and other miracles around the lake of Galilee, Jesus travelled 40 kilometres or so south-west to his hometown of Nazareth – and there he experiences rejection - rejection of himself and his message. Those in the synagogue at Nazareth who heard him speak had evidence of his wisdom and powerful deeds and yet still they reject him – and it seems Jesus is frustrated and puzzled – he wonders at their unbelief, and we might surmise that his disciples were likewise puzzled and dismayed.

Ancient writers were very selective about what they included in their documents, papyrus was in short supply, and you didn't include a particular episode just because it happened - there had to be a reason for its inclusion. It seems likely that one of the reasons Mark included this passage in his gospel is because the Christian community of which he was part was itself experiencing rejection and possibly persecution as it tried to share the good news of Jesus with its neighbourhood, so an account of Jesus also experiencing rejection was immediately relevant for them, as it is, I think, for us today.

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St Mark records that those who heard Jesus at Nazareth 'were astounded' at his teaching and his mighty works. What he means by this is not that they were amazed and impressed but rather it's more as if they're saying to one another 'How is this possible? This can't be right!' And they're saying these things because Nazareth was a small village and they know Jesus from way back – to them he's just a tradie for goodness sake, and his family also is well known to them, and probably all too human, and so, as our translation puts it, 'they took offence at him'. The Greek word translated 'took offence' is 'skandalidzo' – from which we get our word 'scandalise'. In Greek though, it has the meaning 'to cause to stumble'. Their scepticism about Jesus, caused these people to stumble – that is to say, it caused them to stumble in their appreciation of who Jesus really is and of what he had to say. They couldn't recognise who Jesus really is because their thinking was dominated by who they thought he was!

I think it's not so different today. It's not, of course that people today knew Jesus as a child or as the local carpenter – but rather that they base their thinking about Jesus on snippets of information that they have heard from who knows where. Often their information is sketchy, usually it's distorted and rarely is it based on any foundational knowledge of the Gospels – but on the basis of this slight and usually distorted information they form an opinion about who Jesus is, and in my experience usually their image of Jesus is fairly benign, they'll speak of Jesus as a good man or a great teacher, but they don't want to think about, let alone admit, Jesus as the Saviour of the world and the Lord of their lives. Try engaging in that discussion and more often than not you'll find the conversation shut down very quickly. Like the folk in Nazareth, many secular Australians can't recognise who Jesus really is because their thinking is dominated by their own preconceptions.

Well, what's to do about this? If we look at our reading, Jesus simply leaves the sceptics behind in Nazareth and goes off to preach in other villages. It's important to note here that Jesus is responding to this particular situation rather than setting a precedent to be followed every time we're questioned about Jesus or about our faith. In this situation at

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Nazareth the people's prejudice against Jesus is so deep that it makes it impossible for him to do any mighty works, so he moves on. My Mum, who was from 't'north' of England, used to say, 'There's none as blind as them as don't want to see!' We meet these people occasionally and their rejection of the Christian message, and us with it, can be quite rough. On those occasions it's probably wise to follow the example of Jesus and just walk away.

All that said, we need also to recognise that sometimes Jesus showed great patience in answering people's questions, and so should we. Think, for example of Nicodemus in John 3. Nicodemus, who was an intelligent and well-educated man, was struggling to come to an understanding of who Jesus was, and he had a number of questions – but they were genuine questions and Jesus engages with Nicodemus respectfully and patiently. Our lives, both as individual Christians and as a church, should provoke genuine questions about Jesus, and when we get those questions, we should respond to them prayerfully – ask the Holy Spirit to guide you, and patiently and humbly – you don't have to have all the answers, if you don't know the answer to a question admit and go and find out about it.

Along with their prejudice, one of the things that struck me about the people at Nazareth, was their impatience. There's a contrast in our passage between their very reactive attitude and that of the disciples, and I think it's a deliberate contrast. Mark tells us, at the start of our reading, that the disciples followed Jesus – or more accurately 'they were following' Jesus – it's a continuous verb, they were following and continuing to follow Jesus. At this early stage of Jesus' ministry, the disciples didn't have a deep appreciation of who he is. It's not until some 18 months later that Peter makes his confession of Jesus as God's messiah. It's clear from various conversations recorded in the Gospels that the disciples also, at various times, had questions about Jesus – about who he was and about aspects of his teaching, and about the nature of his mission. Nevertheless, perhaps sometimes in spite of their questions, they continued to follow

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him. The disciples illustrate the spiritual truth that it's only in following Jesus that we learn, gradually, almost day by day, who he really is.

The second part of our reading - which records the preaching of Jesus in the surrounding villages and the sending out of the twelve disciples underlines the fact that, despite the rejection and apparent failure at Nazareth, the mission of Jesus continues. Jesus himself goes out to other villages and continues his teaching ministry and he also calls the 12 disciples and sends them out, with his authority, to preach and to heal. In chapter 3 of Mark's gospel we're told that Jesus had called the 12 to him with two purposes in mind. Firstly, they were to be with him, and secondly, they were to preach the good news. (Mark 3.13-14) Up until this episode at Nazareth they had been with him, they had been 'following him', as Mark puts it, but now in fulfilment of Jesus original intention they are sent out to preach and to heal, and their mission is effective. Perhaps the disciples needed to learn through this experience that rejection in one place or with one group, doesn't mean that failure is inevitable everywhere. That, I think, is one of the lessons we are meant to draw from this passage.

As with the first disciples, Jesus calls us firstly to be close to him and then he sends us out to be close to others. Following Jesus – being his disciple - means both being close to him and being sent out to be close to others so as to bring to them the power and presence of Jesus. There will be disappointments as we seek to do this, that is inevitable, we may be rejected quite roughly by some people, well that happened to Jesus and, even if we're at our respectful best, it may happen to us too. One thing is clear – we should not let our efforts to share the good news of Jesus be inhibited or curbed by negative reactions from people in the broader community. God's mission goes on, and as we undertake it in faith and in the name of Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit, it will touch and transform lives, perhaps in ways we may not see or could not have imagined.

Thanks be to God for the privilege of sharing in this great work. Amen

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