

Sermon for 7th July 2024, Proper 9, Year B

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Mark 6:1-13

Sermon

“Familiarity breeds contempt” appears to be the main theme of our Gospel reading today, as Jesus finds that his hometown of Nazareth is not quite as supportive as he might have hoped.

By the time we arrive at Chapter 6 of Mark's gospel, Jesus has been out preaching and doing miracles for quite a while, all around the Sea of Galilee near where he grew up. Now he arrives back in Nazareth with his disciples in tow, and he teaches in the synagogue, where many are astounded at his wisdom. The local boy done good, you might think – how wonderful that such a famous teacher and healer came from our village! But no, the people who knew Jesus growing up are not impressed. “Isn't this the carpenter?”, they ask. And they took offence at him.

But before we get all judgemental about this small village being unable to recognise the Lord of Lords, Divine Son of God, right there in their midst, we should probably ask ourselves how we might have reacted in similar circumstances.

Imagine there's a young person who grew up just down the road from you, maybe twenty, twenty-five years younger than you, and you knew them all their lives. You watched them be naughty and make all kinds of dumb decisions as a child; maybe they weren't exactly the brightest or most popular at school. Then suddenly in their very early 30s – still ridiculously young relative to most of us – they come back to their home village church having become a famous preacher in some other town across the border somewhere.

It's not hard to imagine some muttering. "We know this person, we know their mum, we see their brothers in the local pub. They weren't bad working with their hands, but where did they get all this wisdom stuff? And why are those miracles being done in some other village and not here?"

Maybe the first lesson from today's Gospel is not to let our immediate assumptions or prejudices about someone prevent us from hearing the wisdom they have to offer, or receiving kindness from their heart.

I don't know if any of you ever watched the TV comedy "Rev" from 2010, about the rather unsuccessful inner-city ministry of the Rev Adam Smallbone played by Tom Hollander? In one of the final episodes, a despairing and rejected Adam meets a rambling, slightly mad homeless guy on a park bench whom Adam initially dismisses as just too weird to listen to, before the guy reaches out, places his hand on Adam's shoulder, looks at him and calls him by his name, that Adam had never told him. "Adam, Adam," he says, "We all have our crosses to bear, and I will always be with you." When Adam looks up, the man has disappeared, and Adam realises he's just had an encounter with God.

So often in the New Testament it's not the intelligent and well-trained religious people who show us God's love, but instead it appears in the actions and testimony of the most ordinary people.

Look around you in this room – we might be the people who make God appear for you, right before your eyes. It can often be more tempting to gravitate towards people with authority, popularity and social status, but Jesus always spends more time with those who have simple faith: those who, whatever their circumstances, trust God to love and care for them.

I remember in my very early twenties being in a charismatic church where there was much talk of gifts from the Holy Spirit, and we were encouraged to consider which one we'd most want to ask God for. I said quite piously at the time that I

would choose the gift of wisdom, for what could be more highly praised than that, and what could be more useful? Well, I was quickly warned that asking for wisdom was a dangerous affair; for God does not give wisdom magically, out of nothing, but teaches it by difficult and painful experience, and I soon realised how right they were.

These days if asked the same question again, I would ask for faith, not wisdom. You could say I now have the wisdom to ask for faith. Faith allows a person to draw close to others in relationship, whoever they are, because faith is always vulnerable, with childlike trust. For a person with the gift of faith, God is always present, and love is everywhere. They can clearly see that everyone – as the monk Thomas Merton once said – is walking around shining like the sun.

Without the simplicity of faith, we will tend to judge people based on education, social standing, ability, popularity, wealth, and what someone might be able to do for us. But with faith, we see people as God sees them.

One of the most beautiful experiences I had as a novice nun was the sudden realisation that none of the sisters cared what I could do for them, or what my gifts or skills might be. They just loved me for being me, accepting me as a beloved child of God, gradually helping me to see myself – and everyone else – that way too. As Bishop Kevin said in his farewell sermon at the cathedral last week, it's impossible to preach or teach about God's love. You can only experience it.

Back in Nazareth, however, the people who had seen Jesus grow up seemed to resent his success, or at least the fact he'd travelled elsewhere to do it. And given that rejection, we can probably imagine how nervous the disciples must then have felt being sent out among the villages in pairs to heal and preach, with specific instructions on how to react if – and when – they, too, are rejected.

I certainly remember feeling terrified when asked by the church I attended in my early twenties to go out in pairs and knock on our neighbours' doors to invite them to an evangelistic outreach church meeting. I think it's safe to say that although I did as I was told, I did not do it with any faith, and the outcome was rather as you might expect. Rather than bringing more people into the church, I was the one who ended up leaving church altogether, not returning for fifteen years.

There's always been a lot of discussion in the church about how best to respond to this instruction by Jesus that his followers should go out to preach and to heal – or in modern language to grow the church and serve the community. You can't really separate the two. Jesus's deeds of love always run alongside conversations about the kingdom of God.

In our culture, we don't really like talking about God. Many of us today are brilliant at caring for our neighbours, and there's a really strong tradition of that here in Glasgow, but probably we're less comfortable talking about Jesus who inspired us.

I admit, I have it easy. All it takes is for someone to ask me "what do you do for a living?" or notice the collar, and I'm away.

But to be honest I think that it's faith that makes it possible to talk about faith. When I went 'door-knocking for Jesus', I didn't really have a faith to talk about. That didn't come until much later. So, this sermon isn't about encouraging you to share your faith more and invite more people to come to church. I know that's not how it works. Instead, I'm going to say that if you want a faith that changes your life and transforms your relationships, ask God for it with the simplicity and naïve innocence and persistence of a child. Bang on the gates of heaven with all the passion of your heart until they open to you. And they will open. God will grant you your desire. I have absolute faith in that.