

“Rejection, weakness and mission”

Reflection: July 7, 2024 Rev'd Ian Brown
Mark 6: 1 – 13

Did Paul have trouble with his eye sight? Was he lame, bald, have a squeaky voice, did he have a problem with body odour? You could read many books about this 'thorn in the flesh' that Paul admits to here, but he doesn't say and nobody else bothered to make a note of it either. The fact is, God's grace deals with it all, and Paul, despite his weakness, follows a good example.

In the gospel story, Jesus hometown critics look for his weak points to bring him down.

Mark tells us, he “came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded.” They were amazed and it's little wonder then, that the folk at home are not too impressed with the youngish itinerant preacher whose brothers and sisters are known. Back in chapter 3, Mark told us that Jesus family thought he was mad! So here in the middle of the story of Jesus, we get a cameo recognition of the potential difficulties of having a past, and the influence of the crowd's attitude.

Jesus could have been just “carpenter junior” all his life, but he was not shackled by his past! He could have always been Mary's little boy, brother of James, Joses, Judas and Simon, and the girls. But he wasn't to be limited by that either.

The story we heard today is often material for a “don't expect your old friends to see you in a new light” sort of moralising. And it's true that the “local boy makes good” story is acceptable in some fields and not so in others.

If Jesus had been a soccer player for example or a military hero, a batsman or a bushranger – fine! It would have been a hero's welcome for sure. But not for a preacher, not for a healer, an advocate of God's kingdom come or “Son of God type” – no!

Jesus comes to his home town – and he comes with his new friends and followers, but more than that, he comes with a new reputation. And the point of the rejection is to pose the question even more sharply for us: “where does Jesus get this new authority – new power – new teaching?” They were amazed. They added up the connections of this ‘craftsman’ and they were scandalized by the changes in him; what he said and what he did. They had him in a box and he could do no deed of power there says Mark, oh, except for a few healings, and then adds that Jesus was amazed – same word – at their unbelief. There is no amazing grace here. This is amazing change, amazing confrontation and amazing newness. It would be like me going home as an Olympic high jump competitor!

It proves to be a turning point in Jesus ministry. Jesus now heads off to teach in the villages and he sends out the 12, two by two to get on with his mission as well.

Bluntly, the story could be read;

1. Jesus and his friends are rejected – then no good happens, apart from a little bit!
2. Jesus and his friends go out in faith and – much good is done.

So when Jesus is rejected in part one of the story, that's not the end, he moves on. Jesus sends out 12 disciples in pairs and he expects that they will get a mixed reaction too. In some gospel stories Jesus is received with open arms and the crowds want to make him messiah or king. There, Jesus response is to tell them to be quiet, to tell no one. Here, in his hometown, where the people reject him, his response is to get on with his mission, and there's a focus on the mission of his followers.

In both situations Jesus attention is on the people who need to benefit, the work to be done, the good news to be shared, the healing and release to be experienced and not on himself. In the face of these two extremes of response to Jesus, he is clear and consistent that the mission is what's most important, not himself. The instructions to his disciples also make it clear that Jesus doesn't want his

disciples to make their mission into something about them. He sends them off organized and empowered, but also impoverished, simplified and reliant on others.

It might be a weakness in our western ways of thinking, but we've often put ourselves in the centre of how we conceive mission. David Bosch has helped the church at the end of the 20th century to come back to what we see in the New Testament. No longer in the age of Christendom, Bosch helps us see that there is a church, because God has a mission, not the other way around. We do not invent mission, we are some small or great part of God's expression of love for all.

As illustrated in the story, some places will receive good news – and good things will happen, and some places won't receive it and the disciples should just move on. Rely, not on the things packed in your bag is Jesus advice, but rely on faith and people's response. So the pattern is set for Jesus and his friends. And the happy outcome in this story is that, unlike many passages in the gospels; here the disciples succeed! Many hear the message and many are healed. It is possible. We don't always muck it all up – these miracles do happen!

And it reminds us that the world was and is still, full of mixed reactions to God's good news told and lived in Jesus and his followers. For us, today, the same question stands – "how do we respond?" "How will people around us, near home, nearby or far away respond?" Will it be standing at a distance, knowing a thing or two about this Jesus and those who are with him, or will it be a joining in, exercising and growing the faith and ability we have?

In the face of belief and unbelief, acceptance or rejection, faith and no faith, Jesus says, go any way, do what you can and then move on and do more. Some will be amazed, and sometimes you will be amazed. Exercise some trust. Travel lightly.

Good advice! Have faith. Try. Do what you can and then keep going and do some more. As

followers of Jesus, we are people who are sent to do good, to bring good news.

Paul was speaking of spiritual heights to the Corinthians. That's a whole other story, but he was brought back to earth by his 'thorn in the flesh'. Like all of us, we would rather not have weaknesses, whatever they might be. For Paul, his weakness did not stop him, it didn't give him an excuse to do nothing for others. He says God gave him this response to his prayer to be delivered of his weakness:

'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.'

Amen.