

Sermon

Sunday 4 July 2021

Lesson

St Mark 6: 1 – 13

Jesus returned to His hometown of Nazareth be among His close family and friends. As a distinguished rabbi, He was invited to teach at the synagogue. On hearing His wisdom and learning, and of the ‘miracles’ He had performed, the large congregation asked, ‘Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary?’ Rather than receive what He had to offer them, they remembered His origin, childhood, adolescence and family status. Blinded to the growth and maturation of the young man, many in the community refused to see the spiritual journey He had been on.

Through visions, the study of Scripture, fasting, prayer and silence, Mary’s son had developed into what the biblical scholar, the late Marcus Borg, called a ‘Spirit person’; a mystic with a deep intuition for the Divine. It seems the community that had reared Jesus did not want Him to get above Himself. At times, there is something small and shallow inside us that denies the gifts, talents and progress of others, including those closest to us. In the Roman Catholic tradition,

envy is one of the seven deadly sins. Envy is pain stirred by another's good fortune and an inner source of true unhappiness. His own kith and kin sought to mock and belittle Him. In so doing, they revealed more about themselves than about Jesus.

Jesus is described as a 'carpenter'. In the Jewish tradition, there may be more to this word than meets the eye. It may mean a 'craftsman of woods', but it may also suggest a learned man; wise and literate in the study of the Torah, the Hebrew Scriptures. Is there a play on words in this story? Whatever the case, Jesus was rejected. He said, 'A prophet never lacks honour except in his hometown, among his relations and his own family'. Jesus was rejected.

We live in an age and culture in which our Christian faith is not mainstream and, in some quarters, vigorously opposed. One third of the world's population, some 2.4 billion people, is said to be Christian. It is estimated that from the year 1900 to 2025 the number of Christians in Africa will have grown from 8.7 million to 600 million. Nevertheless, our experience in western Europe and North

America is that Christianity is in terminal decline. In Scotland, the national church, *our* Church of Scotland, has declined numerically every year since 1955. Due to financial pressures, the Kirk is now having to make drastic cuts to its expenditure. In this year alone, the Church expects to spend over 20% of its reserves.

The reasons for decline in the west are complex: is it the scientific narrative, simplistic theologies, the rise of other world faiths, the increasing wealth of populations, or outdated ethics? Whatever the reasons, in a sense, 'Jesus' is being rejected. If not explicitly rejected, there is widespread indifference to Him. This is painful for us to hear, though we see it all around and know it in our own families. How, then, are we to respond?

In our lesson today, Jesus sends the Twelve disciples to the surrounding towns and villages. They are to spread His gospel message. He told the disciples to stay wherever they are welcomed and, by contrast, to leave and shake the dust from their feet wherever they are not. Jesus told the disciples to carry a stick with them: no

bread, pack or money, but a stick. For me, imaginatively, the stick is suggestive of the stick or staff of Moses. It was the staff of Moses that, by God's word, turned into a snake – and back again – as a sign of God's presence. Later, using the stick, Moses struck the rock in the wilderness and water poured out: the people and livestock drank. Perhaps the evangelist wants us to know that we are spiritually to drink from Jesus: union with Christ is lifegiving.

As the church in Scotland contracts, it is worth remembering that, before the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine in 312AD, the church was small, had remained small since the days of Jesus, and was not formally associated with the state. Paul wrote letters to numerous Christian communities across Asia Minor: Galicia, Corinth, Thessalonica and Rome. Other letters, written in his name, went to Ephesus, Philippi, and Colossae. Apart from Rome, there is likely to have been only one church community in each place. Scholars believe that numbers will have been very small, perhaps no more than could fit into a house; say, a dozen worshippers.

As we think of our history in Scotland, with the vast expansion of church buildings in the Victorian period following the Disruption – denominations squabbling for decades – where the name of the game was to build a bigger church with a taller spire than the one down the road, it is perhaps a good thing that we are being forced to leave much of that behind. Institutional pride and vainglory are to be discouraged in the Christian church. What matters is the water from the rock: spiritual drink on the inner journey. If we think of the Hebrew people across the centuries, beginning with their liberation from slavery in Egypt, it is the wilderness experience that was most formative for them and the palatial temples they built were destroyed. The cosying up of religious and political leaders, the High Priest and the Roman Governor, was perhaps not of God. Crucially, what matters is the spiritual journey. We love our buildings; we love our public worship. However, God is a pilgrim God, and we are a pilgrim people.

The Jesuit author, the late Fr Gerry Hughes, was a wonderful man.

Amusingly, I remember him telling me the story of a pastoral visit he

made to a woman aged 102. During the visit he asked her, ‘What are the benefits of being 102?’ She replied, ‘I am no longer subject to peer pressure!’ In his book, *God, Where Are You?*, Hughes describes a moment in which, as a child, he held a plum between his thumb and index finger. He squeezed it more and more firmly in the hope that the stone would fly out. Later, he understood this image as that of his spiritual life. Hughes felt himself caught in a pincer movement between God, the source of all that delighted him, who was at work in every moment and every detail of his life and, the other pincer, the church hierarchies and its restrictive teaching: its lack of openness to God beyond its own non-porous doctrinal walls. Why, he asked, was his church deaf to the spiritual witness expressed by other Christian denominations and deaf also to the spiritual experiences of other world faiths?

Hughes opens his book by addressing God. He wrote:

I have never seen You, touched You, heard You, tasted You, smelt You. You are invisible, yet enveloping all things, elusive, yet inescapable, remote yet closer to me than I am to myself...In You, creation lives, and moves and has its being. You are in all things....Creation is Your

sacrament, Your Eucharist, a sign...of Your presence....
My mind cannot encompass You, but my heart longs for
You. It is in the pain of my emptiness that I glimpse You.
I long for You, but I cannot grasp You.

To my mind, this is the spiritual journey, the gold, the treasure, that
the Church offers. Let us keep faith with Jesus, and don't forget your
stick!

Amen.