

**5th July, 2015.**

**Reading: Mark 6: 1 - 13**

**Sermon: The Challenge of Outreach**

**A prophet is not without honour except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home.**

That is the verse which is at the heart of our Scripture reading for today. The verses before that verse show that what it says is true. The verses which come after it show us how Jesus reacted.

In his visit to his own home town, Jesus came as a Rabbi, as a teacher. The people in Nazareth were confused by him. They showed contempt for his teaching in the synagogue but they couldn't understand where He had got all this knowledge from or how He could perform miracles or act so wisely.

We know from our own life experience that familiarity breeds contempt. Remember that Jesus died aged thirty-three and He left home to start His ministry aged thirty. The locals had known Jesus all His life.

They knew who His mother was and they knew His brothers and sisters. Who did He think He was? He was just a carpenter. He was no better than them. He was just a working man and they despised Him for that and yet, as Willie Barclay points out, therein lay His glory.

Willie Barclay says: When God came to earth, He claimed no exemptions. He took upon Himself the common life with all its common tasks and He warns

against judging people by externals rather than by what he calls their native worth.

However, the people were not the only ones who were confused. Jesus was also confused, it would seem. He was amazed at the lack of faith seen in His neighbours and local villagers.

How could they reject Him when they knew the Scriptures and the stories surrounding His birth? He must have felt that they should have known better than strangers but maybe therein lay the problem. They weren't strangers. They knew him through and through or so they thought but it cost them dearly.

The whole atmosphere in Nazareth was wrong for Jesus to minister to them. After teaching in the synagogue, He could do nothing other than laying hands on a few people who were ill because no one really took him seriously.

Willie Barclay makes an interesting point. He says: There can be no preaching in the wrong atmosphere. Our Churches would be different places if congregations would only remember that they preach far more than half the sermon. In an atmosphere of expectancy the poorest effort can catch fire. In an atmosphere of critical coldness or bland indifference, the most Spirit-packed utterance can fall lifeless to the earth.

In other words, the impact that the sermon has on congregations is down to what is in the hearts of the listeners. If people come to Church with the right attitude of mind, open to the movement of the Spirit, they will

receive from the Spirit, no matter how good or bad the sermon is. If people come to Church closed and are critical of everything that is said and done, they will receive nothing, even if the sermon is brilliant.

Jesus' teaching was brilliant but the majority of people received nothing from it because they were judgemental and dismissive of everything Jesus said and did.

With regard to congregations preaching more than half the sermon, I would suggest, that a good part of that preaching by congregations is done after the individuals leave Church.

Our attitude in the community is a reflection of what we take from worship and of what we receive from Jesus and it is that attitude which the majority of people see.

Again, however, if they are closed and indifferent, they will receive no more than closed, indifferent individuals within the congregation. If they are open and in a receptive mood, they will receive the love and the forgiveness and the challenge which is received by individuals in our congregation. We continue to preach when we leave here.

However, all Jesus could do was move on because he was treated with contempt. Why would He stay? As He said to His disciples: **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** or as it says in Willie Barclay's own translation, **shake off the dust from the soles of your feet, to bear witness to the fact that they**

**were guilty of such conduct.** The locals were the ones who paid the price.

Jesus left and He went from village to village, speaking to people in places where He was not known, except perhaps by reputation because word of what He was doing and saying was spreading from place to place.

As for the disciples, Jesus sent them out in twos with authority over impure or unclean spirits. They went with a clear function. They went to preach repentance. They went to preach that people needed to turn from their sins and turn back to God.

We have watered down that message to such an extent that, nowadays, no one knows that they need to do anything and few will have any real idea of what our function, our mission, our calling, is in the community.

There is a lot said by Willie Barclay about the instruction the disciples were given, namely **to take nothing for the journey except a staff - no bread, no bag, no money in their belt - and to put on sandals but not to wear two tunics.**

We just glide over that normally but what is interesting is that when a man entered the Temple courts, he had to put off his staff, his shoes and his money girdle. It is as if Jesus is telling His disciples that the ordinary homes they are going to enter are every bit as sacred as the Temple Courts.

Jesus said: **Where two or three gather in my Name, there am I with them.** If we remember that the Church is the people, then our homes become the Temple Courts,

places which are sacred and in which Jesus meets with us and that throws up a whole new challenge about how we use our homes.

Interestingly, Jesus told His disciples to take no bread with them on the journey. That was because hospitality was a sacred duty in the east. It was the duty of locals to feed any strangers who came to their village. Maybe the hospitality industry needs to take this to heart, particularly in places which adhere to strict opening hours or close on days when there is an influx of visitors.

I know of two hotels which refused food to people. In one instance, the people arrived a couple of minutes after two. In the second instance, the people were already looking at the menu before two and both places were in the middle of nowhere.

But it is not just the hospitality industry that perhaps needs to take that on board. It's us. How welcoming are we to those who come to our door? How welcoming are we to our elder, for example?

However, taking the story as a whole, as I see it, that whole scenario of a prophet not being welcome in his home town and among his relatives and in his own home, that, combined with the sending out of the disciples in twos, that whole scenario throws out a challenge to us as a Church. It challenges how we, as a Church, locally and nationally, do outreach and spiritual care.

What do we do? Firstly, we send out elders with copies of the Link, our newsletter, which could just as easily, but not as cheaply, be delivered by the postman.

That is not to devalue the Link, but maybe we devalue the role of the elder, particularly when Links are simply posted through doors. Is that the level of some of our outreach and spiritual care? Is that enough or even acceptable?

We need to look at the function of our elders. Do elders have a clear purpose as they go round their districts? Elders have a responsibility for the spiritual well-being of those in their district.

How often does your elder speak to you about faith or encourage you in your faith? How often do you speak to your elder about faith? Elders are not postmen. Jesus sent His disciples out to preach repentance, to encourage people to turn to God. Is that not what we should be doing and where there is faith, should we not be encouraging it? If we don't do these things, how will others hear the gospel? How will others know what we are about? How will we be able to build one another up?

Secondly, we send out elders as individuals. Jesus didn't. He sent His disciples out in twos. There are other faith groups which do the same and there is a reason for it. In twos, you have the support of another and it is much easier to have a conversation when there are three people, particularly if one has little to say. It is not as awkward.

When we see how Jesus organised the disciples, maybe we need to look at how we organise our elders and how well we function as elders among our neighbours, our friends and our families.

Maybe we need to rethink our strategy, which is a word I hate, but I couldn't think of an alternative at the

time. Maybe we need to need to look at how we approach spiritual care and outreach to increase our effectiveness.

Think about it. How do we organise the spiritual support of the people in this parish? We elect elders who live in the area and, by and large, they are charged with the spiritual care of their neighbours. We do that because some people don't have cars and it is easier. The elder just needs to nip along the street. But is that an effective way of offering spiritual support?

I know it can work very well in terms of offering pastoral support to people who are long term neighbours and sometimes friends. Neighbours will rally round when someone is sick and drop in soup or baking or offer a lift to the hospital which is great and that's something which is often the hallmark of a small community and not simply of elders .

But spiritual care is more than that? The suggestion in this passage is that people should be going to visit people they don't know so well or people they don't know at all, rather than their neighbours. Some people are too well known and that can be a challenge to our effectiveness in the area of spiritual support, as it was for Jesus.

Many people find it hard to share their faith within their own families because it is not well received. People are scared that they will alienate their own. Those who are neighbours and friends can face the same risk so it is far easier for a stranger or near stranger.

The threat of change can be daunting and can cause all sorts of ill-feeling but we continue to do the same

things at a cost. How open and receptive are you to what this passage says, as elders and as members of the congregation, because ultimately each one of us has a responsibility to encourage others in their faith, to offer hospitality and to continue preaching the message which is received from God's Word when we leave here.

I leave those thoughts with you for prayerful consideration as our Session looks to future organisation of our congregation and parish.



