

Year B Proper 14

Ezekiel 2:1-5

2 Cor 12:2-10

Mark 6: 1-13

### **Change? Who wants to change?**

On the second Sunday in August in 2018, I attended St Mary's Church, in North Mymms, Hertfordshire, with my mum and my sisters. This was my mum's last service in the parish church she had attended for 63 years, prior to her move to Buxton. I went there with some trepidation – only partly because it would be a fairly emotional last Sunday for my mum and us, but also because I had the immense privilege of taking the service in a church I had grown up in.

In my mind's eye, I wondered how many of the aged members of the congregation would remember the child and teenage version of myself, and wonder in considerable disbelief how on earth I was now able to lead a service, preach to them, and celebrate Holy Communion – admittedly 40 years since I first moved away from the village. Thankfully, I think my memories of misbehaving in the choir pews, and being a typical teenager were stronger in my mind than in anyone who attended church that day in August 2018. I needn't have worried, I was accepted for whom I had become, and the congregation listened to my sermon and received holy communion, before a great leaving party in the church for my mum.

Preaching on my return to my home town was not anything like the torrid experience of Jesus, as we have read in today's gospel.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus returned to his home town, and took on the role of teacher or Rabbi in the synagogue. To begin with people were pleasantly surprised at his abilities to teach and preach. Mark says that 'many that heard him were astounded' at his wisdom and the deeds of power done by his hands. Their positive astonishment at his wisdom and power soon flipped into a much more negative type of astonishment. In some way, it must have unsettled these people, who had known Jesus as a young boy and young adult, and who knew the lowly status of his family. They also made a not very subtle jibe at his birth, saying 'is this not the Son of Mary', with no mention of his father, recalling the village gossiping from over thirty years before about who the real

father may have been. In that society your status was determined by the circumstances of your birth – so in this situation the strong social and cultural norms meant that many struggled to accept Jesus for who he now was, rather than based on his family's status when he was born.

How very human that response was. The people in the synagogue could not accept that Jesus could have changed from the boy they knew of old, and of course, who was probably conceived out of wedlock as well. And yet...

They would have heard many reports about his healing and his teaching ministry before he came back to Nazareth. In Mark's account of Jesus' ministry, Jesus had been healing and teaching for a while, and most recently had brought Jairus' daughter back from death and healed a woman who had been haemorrhaging for twelve years. News of this would have spread quickly throughout the region.

All of this evidence of a life transformed was not sufficient for these people. And because they would not recognise Jesus and believe in what he was able to do, it limited Jesus' power. We are told by Mark that Jesus laid his hands on only a few sick people and healed them. We are left to wonder why his healing worked only on these anonymous few. Mark doesn't waste time with an explanation, but I believe Mark implies that only those who believed in Jesus, who had faith in him, were able to receive healing from him. This also makes clear that without faith, the power of Jesus to heal is greatly diminished. We only have to remember last week's gospel reading to be reminded of that. Both Jairus' daughter and the older woman were healed through absolute faith in Jesus.

Mark contrasts the treatment Jesus received in his home town with his next actions. Jesus commissioned his disciples to go out in pairs with a ministry of healing. Jesus gave them authority over unclean spirits, and to perform deeds of healing – casting out demons and curing the sick – in any community that welcomed them. However, any community that did not welcome them, that refused to hear them, they were to leave and shake off all vestiges of that community, even the dust that might cling to their feet.

This second part of this reading also shows that the power and authority given to the disciples was conditional on the reception and faith of the people they met. They were able to heal and cure physical and mental illness wherever they were well received, where people had faith.

I find it quite sad that the people of Nazareth lost out by their own actions. They had a complete lack of trust, and had a fixed and narrow-minded view, and found it impossible to accept the life and ministry that Jesus had to offer them. Their attitude and disbelief had real consequences for them. They were spiritually impoverished as a result. Jesus' ministry of healing, for these people that he truly loved, was greatly curtailed. The people lost so much when they did not see Jesus the missionary and healer in their midst; they could only see Jesus the son of Mary, an ex-carpenter.

When I read this text, it left me pondering how often we act like the people of Nazareth; when we don't recognise God at work amongst us, when something sacred and unexpected happens, when God shows up in a way we had not expected?

Would we recognise Jesus if he was to come among us? I hesitate to say it, but I think many of us, myself included, may find it hard to truly spot Jesus. He may not be what we are expecting. A disrupter of the social norms we currently have. A disrupter and criticiser of our economic systems. A disrupter of how we worship, what we say and sing and pray perhaps? Someone who tells us exactly how it is, the unvarnished truth, but offered with love and an overflowing presence of compassion – but uncomfortable for us nonetheless. What if Jesus didn't speak using the King James Bible language? What if Jesus upset our status quo, our ways of doing things?

Might we want to shoo Jesus away out of our town, too? Do we really know Jesus so well that we would recognise him today, or would we be like the people of Nazareth? Maybe our faith is too cosy some times. Maybe we know the stories so well that we aren't shocked by the radical nature of the gospel; we aren't unsettled by it; we identify with the good guys in every story rather than with the ones in the wrong?

We are called to be on a constant journey, a pilgrimage of faith. The gospel stories should challenge us, disturb us, and we should be looking for change and growth, not an all-too-comfortable static relationship with God. And one facet of that is that we should be encouraging others to grow in their faith; to not find ourselves expecting other people to stay the same, maybe unconsciously constraining them to a narrow and constricting identity and role. And the logical conclusion of that, is that as we all grow and change, our community of faith, or congregation, our church will change.

None of us is to be restricted by who we were. As we respond to the love of God, as we respond to the life and person of Jesus, to his model of love and compassion, his focus on enabling people to change, to flourish and grow into a new life, as we respond to the Easter story, we are people of the resurrection, who each new day can start afresh, and take a step forward in faith.

Is there anything on your heart that you have wanted to do, but you have felt constrained because of your background, your past, societies norms and expectations? Have you placed barriers in your own way, perhaps?

Today's gospel story is, in one way, a wake-up call. It reminds us that our own attitudes and actions can constrain the power and work of Jesus, in and through us. Can you imagine how the people of Nazareth could have been transformed if only they had received Jesus in the same way that Jairus' and the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years did?

Every day Jesus invites each one of us into relationship with him; to know him and see him at work. Jesus is willing for us to release ourselves from the bonds and limitations we place upon ourselves and upon others. Jesus wants to see us flourish and grow, each and every day.

It takes faith to change, to respond to the Holy Spirit's promptings, and take small steps – or large – forward to look at each person and the world differently each day. What may you wish to pray for, to enable you to see more clearly, see more dearly, and be more Christ-like in all you do? Christ is within each of us; how can we share that, how can we see it in each other?

What may be holding you back? A simple small step may open up a whole new understanding of your life, and your faith. One small change can make a big difference, if done in faith. I can point to several small steps that had a major impact on my life; going to a faith development discussion group; going on my first camino; spending a week at Taizé. I wonder what small step you can take that may change you?