

Talk for Sunday 4th July, 5th of Trinity

St Mark's Gospel begins at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, with his baptism in the River Jordan. He begins to appoint his followers, and they move around together as he, teaches, preaches in the synagogue and performs miracles of healing. They then proceed on to what we presume as Nazareth, where he is invited to preach in the temple.

Here we are told that the people took offence at and struggled with him and did not now wish to be associated with his vision and vocation. It is often hard for others around us when we try to share the faith we have. We are not alone in that experience. Even Jesus was rejected by those who knew him best, and even the people who were able to see him face to face struggled to accept his message. They knew Jesus, they knew their ordinary lives, and they struggled to understand how God could be revealed in that.

It can be hard to see God in ordinary life, and we can find it hard to believe that God really does want to act, to speak, to be known in our ordinary lives. This is not just a story about the people of Jesus' hometown – it's about us too.

I'm sure we can all imagine what it would be like here if a young man in his 30s, with whose family history we were all familiar, started talking about God to us in this church, and outside in the street. I'm sure we would be intrigued, but we might also question his authority and ability to do such a thing. I'm sure the bishop would be

contacted and questioned. However, it could not be the same because it has already been done. The cat is out of the bag. We can be reminded of Bible stories and the life and works of Jesus, and the good news of our salvation and the enduring love of God, but Jesus brought us the good news first.

Jesus was described in the narrative as the carpenter. The Jews had a high opinion of skilled manual work. In the Old Testament the skilled craftsmen who built the Temple were held in high esteem. Being a carpenter was not a low status thing, but it was very definitely an ordinary thing, a familiar thing – especially since this was a carpenter they knew well and had watched growing up. The challenge for the people of Jesus' home town was simply that they knew Him. How could somebody they knew well, whose family members were their friends, also be powerfully, uniquely used by God, speaking with a directness and an authority they had never encountered before?

We are told that they had seen Jesus' wisdom and also his deeds of power, but even so they could not accept them because of this connection with their home community, with their everyday lives. On this occasion, however, the wonder at this wisdom and these deeds of power immediately turned negative as the crowd vocalized a series of questions that led them to the issue of Jesus' own origins. And, they — hometown folk — seemed to know all too well from where he came. If anyone had the right to question Jesus' origins, it should be those who knew him best. Their description of him as "the carpenter," "the son of Mary," ignored any mention of a father figure. As we ponder the message of today's Gospel reading, it's important to stop, and to ask ourselves, are we in the position of the people of Jesus' home village?

This may seem like the shocking record of a community that rejects the Messiah, but are we also actually resistant to God doing new things? If we are brutally honest, there is so much in us, too, that reacts against the idea of God powerfully at work in our ordinary lives, and in our home settings. Truly believing that the God of Heaven and Earth is genuinely at work in our own community, in our own homes, and in our own lives, is challenging. We are maybe not so very different from the locals in Jesus' home town, who found it all too much and could not accept his mission. In the light of that rejection, Jesus does not change his message. He carries on, and then he asks his closest followers to join in the task.

They were to continue the Jesus movement in *households*. This was not unanticipated, in light of Jesus' own successful activity in the homes surrounding Galilee. In this narrative, Jesus' message and activity in the synagogues had been growing less impressive as the story went on. Synagogues, with established religious traditions and authorities, were not always susceptible to new ideas and activities that may have represented a new move of God!

It's all rather unimpressive on the surface, as they set out with no money and very few resources. But as they go, even without equipment or money, and into unprepossessing little communities as they undertake a circuit of the local villages, so God gets to work. They had been with Jesus as he started the tour of local villages, and now are sent out to proclaim what they have heard, to do what they have watched. The track record of the disciples as we read it elsewhere in the Gospels makes it likely that they were not far ahead of the inhabitants of Jesus' home town when it came to believing. They did not find faith easy, and the experience of standing alongside Jesus as he was rejected in his home patch must have shaken their confidence further. But they are sent by Jesus all the same – and

they go. And as they go, God does great things. Verse 12 records that 'many' are delivered and healed – whereas Jesus had been able to help only 'a few sick people' on his home town. They may have expected little when they started, but the disciples must have been surprised and delighted as they discovered God at work in them and through them as they went out in faith. As we think about the message of this story for ourselves, let's remember that we are human, and believing that God can work wonders does not come easily to us. But God has been unsettling us through the very strange, unprecedented events of the last year and a quarter, just as God allowed the experience of rejection to lead Jesus' ministry and to lead Jesus' disciples into a new phase.

So, Jesus prepared his disciples for potential rejection. Wherever rejection existed, so would judgment: "shake off the dust that is on your feet". Yet, according to this account, their mission was successful. The disciples, clueless in several earlier stories, apparently understood enough to carry out this mission effectively.

Maybe God has been opening us up to new things too. Believing probably did not come easily for the disciples as Jesus sent them out, but they went – and God was at work. If, like the disciples, we are feeling under-resourced, deeply conscious that we don't know all the answers yet, that's normal! We may face challenges, and may face disappointments as we live and speak for the God we serve, but we need not worry about being alone in that – Jesus faced them too. The people of Jesus' home town found it hard to believe that God could be at work through somebody they thought was too ordinary. The wonderful irony of this story is that the disciples really were ordinary – and yet God used them in powerful ways. It's always been God's way to work in ordinary life, and that certainly includes our own ordinary lives too. So let's trust Him, and see what God might do in, around and through us in the week ahead.