

Sunday between 3rd and 9th July [14]

Mark 6:1-13

Our Gospel reading this morning falls into 2 seemingly separate sections. We begin with Jesus experiencing what it is like to have a reputation and a past which can hinder your future. It wasn't that Jesus had a bad reputation or that he had led a terrible life in the past, it was just that the impact he was having with his preaching and healing ministry was not possible amongst the people who knew him before it had begun.

I suppose it's a bit like when you know someone who is famous, but you knew them before. If you know someone who is famous in their own field you may have had this experience. When you see a famous person that you simply know as themselves, surrounded with fans of their talent or work it is hard to reconcile. It is impossible to be awe struck by a person from whom we have seen the best and the worst. It's not that we are not please for them or we don't think they deserve success, it's just that we don't see them in that way, we can't.

I suspect this was the difficulty Jesus was having in Nazareth. Word would spread that Jesus had been saying weird stuff and healing people of diseases, and the boys he knew from childhood would be thinking, but this is Jesus, he's just like us, how does he know this stuff, and who does he think he is telling people about religion, he's not a Pharisee, and what about this healing stuff, he's no physician, he has no business interfering with sick people. Jesus is just a carpenter with a mother to support, why would we listen to his views on religion.

It wasn't that Jesus had become less powerful, less divine, it was rather that the people around him found it impossible to have faith in the person they knew so fully as a human. The man they remembered as a vulnerable boy. To believe that Jesus was special in the way people who met him as an adult for the first time believed in him, was too much of a stretch for his own community.

Clergy, for the same reason, try not to minister in the parishes where they worshipped as laity. It does happen here more due to the size of the diocese and restrictions for some families on moving too far, but it's not easy for the parish or the priest. When you are trained for ministry you change, when you think about it that makes sense, otherwise there would be no need for any training, and during that change or formation as it is often known, your change may be less visible to those who have known you longest making it harder to become their priest in that same way as you can minister to a new community.

It speaks a little of repentance and forgiveness in the midst of this, in that part of the problem we have with our past and our reputation, is that we can be different, we can change, but the opinion of others about us takes longer to change. It's not fair, but it is true, and even for Jesus the opinion others had of him stifled his ministry amongst them.

The second part of the gospel is the account of the 12 being commissioned and sent out in pairs to do ministry without Jesus, in his name but without him right there by his side. Perhaps it was Jesus' experience in Nazareth that led him to this training exercise. It may have been that through his experience of suffering from other people's lack of faith in him, that Jesus decided to free his disciples from the prejudices of those who knew them before their formation as disciples had begun, and see how they did amongst communities they had never visited, around people who didn't know them but just listened to their message. The results, it seems, were good, they healed many.

How nerve racking it must have been for the 12 though. We objectively see the value in their ministry of bringing the gospel to a larger group of people and of being with strangers who would be more focussed on the message than the messenger, but for them it was asking a great deal. To leave the familiarity of home with no money or food, no change of clothes even, just a walking stick and what they were wearing, to rely on the generosity of others and the possibility that they may be willing to listen to the message the disciples wished to share with them.

And yet, when the disciples were with Jesus we hear of occasions in the gospel where they were unable to heal the sick or perform miracles in the name of God probably because alongside Jesus they had no faith in themselves and their abilities, they questioned themselves and deferred to Jesus. Being away from him to minister was vital if they were to have faith in themselves as children of God. They needed to completely rely on God's grace for a while to truly believe that that was all that they would need for this work. Experience was required not just theory before they could manage without Jesus amongst them permanently.

A reasonable 1st response to this scripture is relief that God doesn't call us in this way today to walk the streets with just the clothes on our backs to share the gospel with strangers totally reliant on them for our physical needs. But we are called to something as today's disciples. We may not be teachers and preachers but we have been called into God's church, specifically this church, because God has some work for us to do in his name. Sometimes we are called to a place for our own rest and healing, to be ministered to, sometimes we are called to a ministry towards others, mostly it's both things, we have much to offer the community and more to gain from it.

As we consider our calling this morning may we let go of our past and reputation, and the past and reputation of those we meet, in order that we can have faith in ourselves and our brothers and sisters in Christ in this place. We need faith the size of a mustard seed to do wonders, says the Lord, let us grasp that faith in this church and move forward in unity and mutual ministry, thereby showing others what discipleship it truly about.