

Mark 6: 1-13
2 Corinthians 12: 2-10

Rejection at Nazareth

Sermon by Bruce Barber

‘He could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them.’

That is surely extraordinary!

‘He could do no deed of power there; he just laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them’!

Why extraordinary? Because there can’t be anyone who would not rate the greatest of all gifts of power as the capacity to heal just one sick person, not to speak of a few more than that. Yet here we are told: he could do no deed of power there - he just healed some people!

So what might this real deed of power be? The fact is that the real scandal in Nazareth was the rejection of Jesus’ teaching in the synagogue, rejection of his word about the nearness of God breaking into the world in ways calculated to upset every familiar certainty. And, of course, where there is no real comprehension of any new reality, then no mighty work can possibly result.

Such was the mood in Nazareth. As Clive James has recently observed, contrasting how paintings are largely benign: ‘it is words that really scare people’. From the very beginning then it is clear that the creative word met only with cynicism, with petulant assertions, with bland incredulity:

‘Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? We know his mother - Joseph presumably had died - we know his family. We know all about him. It can’t be for real.’

How contemporary! Such are our human responses. Dismiss in principle the local in favour of an imagined messiah from some other place. It’s not unknown, for example, for church sponsored selection committees to align themselves with these confident voices from Nazareth, just as Australians in general were equally once reputed to chorus such sentiments.

Thus are we confronted again by that most enduring fate suffered by God down through the ages: always to be located in the wrong place. Believers and unbelievers alike have conspired together in doing this, usually by insisting that God is always to be understood as some mystery beyond the immediacy of the world. An enormous price has been paid

for this obsession with locating truth in something unknown or unusual rather than the known; at a distance rather than near at hand; in the abnormal rather than the normal.

Take, for example, the Corinthian Christians Paul is engaging again today. They were certainly enthusiasts for mystery - quite understandably, since the prevailing culture was besotted by all manner of mystery religions. They were fascinated by the paranormal, by religious ecstasy, by charismatic display.

All the more significant is it then that Paul himself could boast of such experiences. But in the face of these surrounding cultural and religious preoccupations, his concerns had now come to lie elsewhere. Although compelled to recall a mystical experience which he as 'a man in Christ' had had fourteen years previously, he now had come to see things differently.

'Whether in the body, he writes, or out of the body - I don't know. God knows. Then he repeats it: 'I know that such a person - whether in the body or out of the body, I don't know, God knows - its tempting to read this with our 21st century emphasis - that such a person was caught up into paradise, and heard things that are not to be told'. Then follows some rich self deprecation. 'On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast - except of my weakness'.

Paul has, as we say today, 'moved on'. Now he sees that God is rather more truthfully spoken of in the messiness of actual human existence than in religious heroics. Why? Because those who trade in the realm of mystery very soon come to see this as the main game. They look for constant repetition of mystical experiences. Thus they look to the abnormal, rather than to the always oncoming present claim of the everyday. In other words, they deny grace. Looking like the epitome of strength, they are in fact weak. But let's not romanticise the weak! There is no more virtue in being weak as such than in being strong. The only advantage the weak have over the strong is that they are in principle candidates for grace.

Yet it took some time for Paul himself to grasp this fact - three times, indeed, he says he tried to rid himself of his affliction, whatever it was. Then he realised that in his weakness he was actually stronger than the apparently strong religious enthusiasts all around him, not to speak of his own past. In this, Paul rejoices in the fundamental paradox of Christian faith - that only the weak can be found to be strong; that only God in the pain of life is redemptive; that you won't find God in the unknown if you haven't found God in the known; that only a God prepared to die can bring life.

And with this we are back again at Nazareth:

'Isn't this the carpenter, the Son of Mary, the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon and his sisters? And they were scandalised by him.'

Who would have thought that God should be located in the suburbs? Or the city? God belongs in heaven, or at the very least somewhere more exotic than our town. Fair enough for Jesus to run foul of the religious authorities, which the gospel has told us has already happened, but these are people he had grown up with. All this is but a

preparation for the ultimate rejection by his closest disciples, soon to occur at Caesarea Philippi.

Not for nothing, then, does he call on an earlier proverb - ‘Prophets are not without honour - except in their own house.’ Or, as we might say: familiarity does breed contempt.

The plain fact is: if God is considered to be permanently residing somewhere other than the near at hand, nothing of consequence is at stake; nothing has to change; nothing has to follow.

Only something like that well rehearsed comforting religious illusion can be invoked: ‘God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world’.

But where and when God is present - in the near at hand - action is called for. In place of the torpor and obtuseness accompanying the blinkered myopia evident in Nazareth - what the Gospel calls unbelief - constructive immediacy is required. So Jesus calls his followers to urgent mission. Indeed, the gospel today announces that the mission of Jesus and the mission of the Christian community are identical. We, like the original twelve, continue to be given that same ‘authority over the unclean spirits’, a phrase that is increasingly suggestive of our text’s present relevance.

For we require no reminder that, despite its frequent veneer of respectable benevolence, human need is all encompassing - from that narcissism or nihilism with a smiling face celebrated with increasing desperation in contemporary shopping malls, to that grotesque parody of Paul’s ‘thorn in the flesh’ in the confronting presence of those ubiquitous yellow boxes in public toilets.

What would it mean in the C21st century for disciples not just ‘to help people’ - which is always timely and necessary - but ‘to preach repentance’, ‘to cast out demons’, ‘to anoint and heal the sick’?

One thing is clear. Summoned to such mission, disciples should make use of whatever they need without hesitation. It is not the possession of the extra shirt as such that is warned against, but only the burdening of oneself with it. What’s more, the first twelve were urged to take a stick and a shoe as a protection against snakes and wild animals, against which ‘faith alone’ would not be much use. It is becoming clearer by the day that in the future we will need as many contemporary sticks and shoes as we can muster.

What is so clear here is the prevailing sense of urgency, despite the fact that our text makes allusions lost to us. For example, the historian Josephus tells us, in every Jewish city a social welfare worker was on hand to provide food and clothing for wanderers. So the word not to take bread or beggar’s bag or any money loses some of its exaggeration, and becomes simply good sense, knowing that there will be a meal on arrival.

Or again, an early church regulation laid it down that anyone is a false prophet who stays more than two days in one house. So when we are told that the disciples are to ‘stay until they leave’ - well they would wouldn’t they! - they are being warned against staying longer than two days by changing to more pleasant accommodation in the same locality. Or again, the shaking of the dust from the feet was the action performed by

Jews when they returned to the Holy Land from Gentile territory, intending to leave everything unclean behind them.

In short, everything - all the way from the poverty and unpretentiousness of the messengers to the courage to make clear that judgement which inevitably follows rejection of the message - everything must correspond with that presence in the world which will demonstrate why and how God's time for everyone is more important than anything else.

And that continues to be just such our mandate and mission.

To settle for less than real 'deeds of power' is to be seduced from the sort of mission that Jesus is today urging would-be disciples to share. These deeds of power must, if we are faithful to our text, be such as to demonstrate God's coming to contemporary expression. That is easily said. The difficulty of enacting such mission is that it has to occur in and for a world no longer knowing what such a coming might look like.

But the real issue is this: to settle for less than the truth which is God would be to fail each other at the point of our greatest need. For it would simply come to mean that we would find ourselves paralleling the pathos of the gospel today: 'He could do no mighty work there, though he healed a few people'.