

Almighty God, we thank you for your holy word. May it be a lantern to our feet, a light to our paths, and strength to our lives, in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Having just returned this week from a quick visit to my hometown to see my mother and two older brothers and their families, I was struck by the thought if it were not for the fact that most of my family still live in and around Ipswich, I would most definitely not choose to go there, ever. Growing up in Ipswich, I never really felt I fitted in. Ipswich in the 1970's was based around three institutions; the railway workshops, the Swanbank power station, and Rugby League. I grew up more inserted in music, reading and cricket, so even though it was my hometown, I couldn't wait to 'get out'. In my first job after school, I managed to get work in the Brisbane Magistrates Courts, but after two years I was sent back to Ipswich, because they thought they were doing me a favour!

I am comforted though to know that Jesus seemingly had a similarly vexed relationship with his hometown, as we see in our gospel reading for today. In it, Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth after being very successful in his early ministry. He has developed a widespread reputation for his wisdom and authority. He has proclaimed God's kingdom with thought-provoking parables. He has gathered around him twelve loyal disciples. He has exorcised demons, healed the sick, calmed a storm, and raised a young girl from the dead.

Jesus enters the synagogue of his boyhood and begins to teach. At first, things go very well; Jesus is received with astonishment and curiosity: ""Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!"

But then the mood changes quickly, as it often does in these situations, from admiration to accusation: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not his sisters here among us?" And they took offense at him.

There are two aspects to their attack. The first is by calling him a 'carpenter'. The great divide in the Greco-Roman world was between those who had to work with their hands and those who did not. The Greek word translated "carpenter" is 'tekton', which may be more properly translated "builder". A description of someone as a "carpenter" or "builder" indicated someone who belonged to the illiterate working classes. Jesus does not measure up.

Secondly, they attack his origins. People were normally referred to as the son of their father. Simon Peter, for example, is called Simon Bar Jonah. We have no idea who his mother was. The only reason to identify someone by his mother in Jesus' day was to question who his father was. To refer to Jesus as "the son of Mary", and not, "the son of Joseph", was a calculated act to shame Jesus.

Notice that the people of Nazareth neither dispute that he has wisdom or that he performs mighty works; they are just dumbfounded that it comes from a hometown boy like Jesus. The problem is that they think they know who Jesus is. In a social system where one's status in the community was fixed at birth, it was not considered possible for someone like Jesus, a carpenter of questionable parentage, to amount to anything. They are effectively saying, "We know exactly where you come from! Remember your place!"

Mark then records that, because of their lack of belief, Jesus can do no acts of power except to cure a few people. This stands in sharp contrast to the previous chapters where Jesus' power seems nearly limitless. In some way, the people's small-mindedness, their lack of trust, and their inability to embrace a new way of looking at things, kept them in spiritual poverty. So, they missed the presence of God in their midst.

Likewise, a congregation's openness to the power of God will have a great deal to do with how much God's power can accomplish in that particular community. When a 'Can't do' attitude is dominant in a congregation its dampening effect can become very evident.

The next part of this week's gospel seems somewhat at odds with the first part. Jesus has just met with failure in his hometown. So, what does he do? He sends the twelve out on a mission. Which is an interesting thing to do, as the previous time Jesus spoke to the disciples, he was not complementary: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And yet these are the people he is sending out!!

Sending the disciples out two by two may have been done for safety reasons. It was dangerous to travel alone on the ancient roads. It may have been for mutual strengthening and because they did not take their own provisions but rather depended on the hospitality of those they met. But Jesus promises that while some will receive them, others will refuse their ministry. Jesus' powerful presence doesn't guarantee "success". Once again, in our day, people will at times listen to the Good News the Church has to proclaim and at other times they will refuse to listen.

But the important thing to take from this week's gospel is that we keep going, we keep proclaiming, we keep serving the community we live in, even during difficult times, when an increasing number of people are rejecting the message we are proclaiming. Today's gospel is a call to perseverance for the Church, knowing that what we do will sometimes work, and at other times will fail, sometimes miserably. But we also need to try different ways of presenting the Good News God has entrusted to us, trusting always that whether in good times or in bad, God is with us.