

Failure and rejection

A sermon preached at St Peter's Wolvercote on Sunday 9 July 2006 (Trinity 4) by Revd Dr Mark Butchers on Mark 6.1-13.

Mark 6.1-13

¹Jesus came to his home town, and his disciples followed him. ²On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, '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! ³Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offence at him. ⁴Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.' ⁵And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.' ¹²So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

One of the themes which emerges from this Gospel reading is that of Jesus' rejection. He arrives with his disciples in his home town, presumably Nazareth, though it isn't named. He arrives there having just accomplished some mighty "deeds of power". In the chapter before this morning's reading, Mark tells us that Jesus cleansed demons from someone by sending them into a herd of pigs, raised Jairus' daughter and cured a woman of bleeding when she touched his cloak.

It is obvious from our Gospel today that reports of all this had reached Nazareth. So when Jesus arrives and goes to the synagogue, he is invited to preach and he amazes his hearers with the wisdom of his words. They begin to ask questions: "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!"

Those are questions which generation after generation have asked about Jesus. They are just the sort of questions which form the bridge from wondering amazement to solid belief. But in the case of the Nazarenes, their questions lead not to faith but to rejection of Jesus. They hear his wisdom, they acknowledge his mighty deeds, but to accept that Jesus is anything more than the carpenter's son brought up in their midst, is beyond them. Perhaps it was a case of "who does he think he is?" putting on these airs and graces. Or perhaps their image of the Messiah as a person who would come with power and glory, could not bend to encompass someone brought up in their midst.

Whatever the reason, they reject him; and that lack of faith in him prevents Jesus from doing any deed of power in that community – apart from curing a few sick people, who perhaps did have faith in him.

This rejection at Nazareth is not an isolated incident in Mark's Gospel. On the contrary, this story is an echo of Jesus' rejection not just by his own town, but by many others in Israel. Time after time he fails to convince people of who he is. Thus the Jewish authorities of the time see him as a threat and a blasphemer and arrange for his arrest and trial. Even those who are supportive of Jesus fail to understand him and some deny and desert him.

All of this culminates in Mark's Gospel on the cross where Jesus not only endures the rejection of his people, but even feels himself rejected by God: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He dies a broken man, seemingly a failure, despised and rejected by all, the Suffering Servant described by Isaiah. In Mark's Gospel, therefore, Jesus not only ate with outcasts and rejects from society, but actually became one himself. This morning's reading is an echo of that Marcan theme.

What then are the consequences for us? How does Jesus' rejection and seeming failure affect us? There are two things I would say. Firstly, rejection and the sense of failure which goes with that is something that all of us will have experienced in some way or other in our lives. If you are like me, those moments will be etched in your memories in a way which still, years on, stirs emotions and evokes pain. Playground memories of 30-

40 years ago, memories of failed relationships, still run deep for me. There will be similar things for each of us.

The knowledge that God has entered the depths of pain and rejection on the cross, the knowledge that he has gone before us into the valley of our own shadows, does not take away the pain of our remembered rejections. That is still real, and when fresh, very hard to bear. But perhaps God's entering into the suffering and his ultimate transformation of it, as the resurrection testifies, provides a context in which to set our own suffering. It gives us a context of divine understanding of our pain, and also of hope for an ultimate healing of the scars.

The other thing I want to say is drawn from St Paul's second letter to the Corinthians 12.10, where he says: "whenever I am weak, then I am strong". Paul is saying that when he feels weakest, then he is strongest, because it is then that God is most at work in him. There is a powerful truth in this. I know that if I try to do things in my own strength, as I so often do, there is perhaps less room for God to work. Perhaps it is when we feel most vulnerable, when we feel that we are failing, that we most often cry out to God. Could we say that it was in the very rejection and seeming failure of the cross that God was most at work? Could it be that it is in the moments when we are at our lowest that God is most present, even if at the time, we find ourselves crying out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

In her book *Contemporary Reflections for Praying and Preaching* (p.181), Sheila Walker expresses this beautifully succinctly:

Feeling weak at the knees
is a very good place – the only place –
to begin:
giving way, bowed, face down
I can face up to the fact
that 'I can't': and then, in the space
that follows, sense the divine whisper
'But / can!'

Amen.