

Changed by Jesus?

A summary of the sermon preached by Revd William Whyte at St Peter's on Sun 8 July 2018

Refs: *Ezekiel 2.1-5; 2 Corinthians 12.2-10; Mark 6.1-13*

One of the great surprises for anyone first reading the Bible is the discovery that Jesus isn't as nice as you expect him to be. It's not all gentle Jesus, meek and mild. It's not all kind words and gentleness. There is condemnation. There is anger. And there are moments where he is unhappy – and quite willing to show it.

Another of the great surprises of the Gospels is who it is that makes Jesus angry: who disappoints him; who gets condemned. Because it's not who you might at first expect. Throughout the New Testament it's not sinners, not evil-doers, not even his murderers who are rebuked. It's the good. It's the pious and ostensibly God-fearing: the holy men, the Pharisees, the priests – even his own disciples. In the Gospels, Jesus is endlessly patient and forgiving with those who know no better. But he expects better – much better – from those who do know better.

And that explains a lot about today's Gospel: what it is, and what's it's meant to mean to us.

In Mark 6:1-13 Jesus returns home. He returns, preaches, and amazes all with his teaching. He's with his own people and with people who don't just know him; they now know – and they acknowledge – his great power; his truth and his wisdom. Yet, despite all that, they ignore him and reject him. As a result, he can do nothing with them.

Within the wider context of Jesus' ministry, this episode tells us much. On the one hand, his rejection places him within the long line of Jewish prophets who came before him and who were also rejected. On the other, this rejection foreshadows the still greater betrayal he will experience: the rejection which leads to his death.

For us, however, this Gospel story has a more immediate and important message – especially if we remember that Jesus expects most from his own people; from those who ought to know better.

As Christians – as Churchgoers – we are his people. As Christians – as Churchgoers – experience Jesus' presence together: in prayer, in worship, in the Eucharist. Yet the question for us is whether we really feel the power of that presence, whether we are changed by our encounter – by his presence. Or are we like the people in this story: people so used to it all that it doesn't really change us? Are we so familiar with Jesus that our encounter doesn't really change us at all?

A non-Christian friend of mine once observed that attending Church had been one of the great disappointments of her life. She sat in the pew watching people go up to receive the Eucharist and watching them return. Here was meant to be a great, moving, transformative experience. Yet they seemed unchanged, unmoved: just queuing to get up and then rushing back to sit down afterwards.

That is a challenge for us – just as this Gospel reading is a challenge for us. How can we find new ways of experiencing what is so familiar to us? How can we rediscover just how extraordinary what it is that we are doing here? How can we open ourselves up to be changed by Jesus, here and now and forever?