

Sermon Archive 492

Sunday 7 July, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Mark 6: 1-13

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I can't remember the exact details of how it came to happen, but one day (I think when I was probably a student at Auckland University - so already knew everything) I ended up at my father's place of work, Elm Park Primary School in Pakuranga. Dad first had gone there many years before to be the Deputy Principal. And being the Deputy Principal required him to do various duties, including getting several hundred children into the school hall for assemblies. In that hall on that day, I remember the slightly damp smell of barefoot children, and the noise - talking, laughing - the messy sound that large groups of crossed legged little people make when forced into a confined space. My father mounts the stairs to the stage, and loudly says something like "school stand". And the school stood! Talking stopped and children stood. In their hundreds, they stood.

At home, when Dad came into the room, his flesh and blood teenagers remained sprawled on their couches, eyes glued to the TV. If he was forward enough to say anything like "hello my babies", said babies may have given him a grunt.

"Out there", Dad had a reputation for being very good with students who sometimes in those days were called "difficult". He had an assurance in the classroom, a supreme competence. He was said to be impressively and helpfully patient. As the small school at which he was deputy got bigger and bigger over the years, and so the deputy's job rose up and up in seniority and salary band, his grading always was bumped up by the school inspectors, to keep him in that role. Valued in the community. "School stand!" - and school stood.

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As I said, on a daily basis at home, he was just Dad. For my sister in particular (who, of his three offspring, temperamentally was probably most like him) he was also an irritating man who said exactly the wrong things

at exactly the wrong times. If he'd tried saying "family stand", Andrew and I would just have remained inert blobs on the couch - out of indifference, rather than out of rebellion. Susan, however, would have found a way of telling him that he wasn't in any position to tell us to stand! And reading the particular "lie of that land", Daddy knew better than even to try.

Had we been more "awake" to who he was, we would have realised that we had so much about him to admire. He was a magnificent father. He worked. He cared. He supported. He worried. He did a million little jobs. He talked to us. He loved our mother - and us. He helped make us who we are. While he was a brilliant teacher, he was an even better father. But it was just the structure of ordinary life (shall we call it "familiarity"?) that meant most of his highest offerings (to us as a family) went uncelebrated. I don't think he minded - for you don't "do" love for recognition, do you?

Yet, because I was at Elm Park Primary for an assembly that one day, I am left with this strange memory of him (countering my home-grown assumption of him being ordinary) being significant beyond the familiar walls of our home - of him being very good at something else, out there in the big wide world, that kind of admired him more obviously than we did.

What did someone say? "Prophets are not without honour except in their own hometowns, and among their own kin."

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Jesus goes back to Nazareth (where he grew up), and the people probably know that he's doing great things out there in the world. Or, if they don't, maybe they just notice now that he's back that he's grown up a bit, and is speaking well. And there may be rumours of deeds of power being done, rumours of him having a wisdom.

But then another critique pushes out its elbows. Isn't he the carpenter? Isn't that his family just over there - looking ordinary, teens lolling on the couch, mother's false teeth and aunty's slippers? It's not that he's done anything **wrong** in Nazareth, but there's something about him being so familiar that causes the people to "take offence". And in some strange self-fulfilling "lack of expectation", in Nazareth he's unable to do anything

spectacular, other than form a spectacular amazement at the people's lack of faith. Stunning it is! School stand? Nah. School just sits, slightly damp and barefoot, cross-legged on the floor.

I wonder how he might have been able to turn them around. Could he have turned their water into wine? Could he have walked across the sea? Could he have raised Lazarus, or healed a withered hand? Could he have been transfigured before them, or rolled a tombstone away from the inside? Those who write his biography *put* these things into his story. Rather, though, than follow that line of miracle, just now I follow the current story of Jesus, and what he did next.

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Next, he speaks to his disciples, who maybe have found this Nazareth reaction either sad, or annoying, or perplexing. Might they have expected a celebration for a local boy made good? Because that does sometimes happen. The ticker tape parades; the showing of the shield to the crowds in the Square; the odd festival of red socks in Queen Street. It *could* have worked that way - he could have aimed for that!

But no. Instead he shifts the focus from himself to the disciples (who have no growing reputation). The disciples are to go out in twos. See, nobody should go solo when calling the kingdom into being. But nor should anyone go with smoke and mirrors, with fanfares, with green screens and armies, with a letter from the President.

Jesus tells them to go with no bread, no bag, no change of clothes - NO MONEY! What makes things happen in the world? MONEY! What makes people take you seriously? MONEY! For God's sake, don't take any money with you. Just take your words. That will be enough. With a walking staff, sandals and no change of clothes, that will be enough. And if it's not, then, well, just move on. Because when it comes to what we're building here, says Jesus, if the simple integrity of the Word isn't enough, then you're not among the right people. Even if you were born to them, if your word isn't enough, then you're not among the right people.

That is what the Nazareth-rejected Jesus encourages his disciples to understand - the simple, immeasurable value of a word offered in faith, hope and love.

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There is something that doesn't need to be proved about the patience of a teacher, his integrity, his comfort in the skin in which he teaches. The schools just stands. There is something that doesn't need to be pimped, or trumpeted, or bedecked with "a vulgarity of infrastructure", about what Jesus does in Nazareth - or what any of us might do in Ōtautahi Christchurch, in the name of the ordinary carpenter whose mother, brothers and sisters are with us. Incarnation - God is with us in the familiarity of a human being. How **ordinary** to be with us in a human being! Christian Faith, as an incarnational faith (God in the familiar and ordinary), was perhaps too great a challenge to the people of Nazareth. How is it, I wonder, for us?

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That is where the sermon could have ended, had I been able to fend off the temptation to put to you a few points to ponder.

As we come to the table, to break bread (which earth has given, and human hands have made), and say instead that it is the presence of God among us, ponder this:

- Might God be present to you in ways that are hidden to you by familiarity?
- Might some of the most significant spiritual things you can do be ordinary things like loving your family and friends?
- Might seeing the image of God in those around us maybe enable something unspectacular like the curing of a few sick people?
- Might simple words and gentle ways (that do not insist on being received, but are willing to leave if that seems best) be the best way for the work of Jesus to be done?

We might include some of that in our prayers - but for now, we keep a moment of quiet.

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