

Homily for Pentecost 6, 2021

'The Apostle's trial run'

Mark 6:1-13

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TEXT

Mark 6:1-13

He left that place and 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.

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INTRODCUTION

Many of you would be aware of how pastors in the LCA are trained.

Candidates go off to seminary for a few years,
Then they are sent out on something we called 'vicarage',

They're given some authority,
Not too much,

And they're sent out on what you could call a **trial** run.

You've had many vicars here over the years, of course.

I remember my vicarage and the time leading up to it well.

It's a time of excitement,
A time of growth,

A time of lessons that one needs to learn.

Well,

What happens between Jesus and his 12 apostles in our text is something like his preparation for their vicarage.

They are being prepared for,
and sent out on,
something of a trial run.

As this happens,
Jesus has some significant lessons to teach them,

And there are significant lessons for us here as well.

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THE PREPARATION – FAMILIARITY AND UNBELIEF

The text begins with Jesus returning to his hometown,
Nazareth.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem,
But he grew up in Nazareth.

He's returning home,
And his disciples follow him.

That's important to note.

We don't hear anything **from** the disciples in this first section,
But they are there,

They're watching,
Listening,
Observing,

And this last lesson before they're sent out,
Is not an overly encouraging one,
Because it's about **rejection** and **unbelief**.

As Jesus so often does,
He goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath,

Jesus honours the religious rituals of his people,
He goes to church, to use our language.

But he's not just *attending*,

He's *teaching* from the Scriptures,

And that's where the trouble begins.

The people's reaction is rather strange.

They recognize something profound in Jesus' teaching,

They recognize a **wisdom**, they say,

But they have trouble coming to terms with the *message* because of their **familiarity** with the *messenger*.

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.

What's going on here?

The people in Jesus' hometown had grown up with him.

They had seen him play in the street with the other boys and girls.

We can imagine they even watched him learn his trade as a carpenter from his dad Joseph.

Perhaps they even had furniture in their house Jesus had worked on?

They knew his family,

So now they're thinking,
how can this ordinary hometown boy we know,
claim to be teaching with authority about the kingdom of God?

And because of this the people of his hometown are *offended* by him,
They *stumble* over him,
They're *scandalized* by him,

They don't *believe*.

This is a good reminder for us,
That Jesus grew up as a regular Jewish boy for the most part.

Jesus did not grow up with a shining halo around his head.

He did not grow up doing miracles to impress his friends.

When the prophet Isaiah spoke of the servant of the Lord who would come in the future,
He said,

'...he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.' Isaiah 53:2.

Jesus summarises the reaction to him with a little proverb,
'Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town...'.

It's similar to a saying in English that some of you know:
'Familiarity breeds contempt'.

One definition of this proverb is that it refers to the situation when...
'extensive knowledge of, or close association with, someone or something leads to a loss of respect for them or it.'

We all know how this happens in human life don't we?

We take each other for granted,
We don't appreciate what we have in those close to us.

What parent hasn't had that experience of trying to teach something to a child umpteen times,
Only to have them come home and say,
'Guess what such and such a person taught us today!'

You're thankful that's something's got through,
But exasperated that all the times you've said it,
it hasn't got through.

Sometimes when we're too close to something or someone,
It's hard to receive the good things on offer there.

In Nazareth,
There's also a bit of what Australians would call the tall poppy syndrome going on here, I think.
It's a funny thing isn't it?

You'd think that after Jesus popularity the people of his hometown would've welcomed him back as
a hero,

But that's not always how it works.

If I'm worried that I might be getting a bit too big for my boots,
I know an easy solution,

I can just go and hang out with my brothers for a bit!

They'll soon bring me back to size,

And of course, I'm more than happy to return the favour!

It's the over-familiarity with Jesus here,
that leads to unbelief.

***Friends,
Let us never become overly familiar with the things of God,
To the point of disrespect and unbelief.***

Especially for those of us who have been Christians for a long time,
Who have had a long association with the Church,

It can easily become *all too familiar*.

We too can be tempted,
to take offense at the humble and unexpected ways,
in which God is at work among us:

Through the fumbling words of a human preacher,

Through simple water at the font,

Through bread and wine,

Through the presence of a fellow Christian brother or sister.

We can become all too familiar with these means of God's Spirit among us,

And this can lead to unbelief.

You don't want to go there.

Notice it limits Jesus' power in a mysterious way,

And it amazes Jesus for all the wrong reasons,

*'...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.'*

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THE SENDING OUT – COMMUNITY (885)

So this is the Apostle's last lesson before they are sent out.

They've seen it won't be all honour and glory,

Now they're ready to go out with the message of God's kingdom drawing near,
and the call to turn back to God,

because notice,
that just as for Jesus,

There will be places that don't hear **them**,

In which case they are to shake the dust off their feet,
and move on.

But what else is Jesus teaching them as he sends them out?

There's a lot here.

Jesus' shares **his** authority with the 12,
Here especially '*authority over unclean spirits*'.

The ambassadors of Jesus don't go out in their **own** power and authority,
But in the power and authority of Jesus.

We notice as well that they are to travel *light*,
No bread, no bag, no money,

No spare tunic.

So there's an **urgency** about all this,
There's a call to **trust** here,
To rely on the Lord to provide for them especially through those to whom they go.

That's the detail I'd like to focus on a bit more,
the emphasis here on **community**.

I wonder if you picked up this theme?

It comes up first as Jesus sends them out,

How does he do it?

Two by two, doesn't he?

The smallest unit of Christian community, you could say.

And from a strategic point of view,
this can be counter-intuitive.

Because you could think the impact would be greater if they were sent out as individuals,

Couldn't you then have the message of Christ being proclaimed in 12 villages at any one time rather than 6?

Well, maybe,
But the mathematics of the Kingdom aren't as simple as that,

The pattern we see in the New Testament is '*team-ministry*', to use a modern term,

Two by two,

Pairs at the very least,

Who can encourage one another,
Who can keep each other accountable,

Who also fulfill the Old Testament injunction that truth is established on the basis of two or three witnesses.

So even in the way in which the Apostles are sent,
We have a pointer to the importance of community in Christ's kingdom.

But then it becomes more pronounced as the text goes on.

Did you notice how they're supposed to carry out this work,
And why they aren't to take too much stuff?

It's because they'll be taken care of, **by the people** to whom they are sent.

Households will receive you, Jesus says to the apostles.

The idea is that they will provide your food and shelter.

You set up *Homebase* with them so to speak,

And it's almost as if this begins a little congregation.

It seems to me this is very significant,

That the Apostles aren't sent out **alone**,
To call only **individuals** to turn to God.

But they are sent out in *pairs*,
And they are received by *households*,

And they do their work in that context.

I'm drawing out this theme today,
Because it's one I believe we need to return to again and again in our modern times.

We live in a time when there is so much emphasis on the individual,

And this carries over then into our faith.

Modern technology encourages this,

We can easily become spiritual consumers who surf the internet looking for our spiritual fix,
All alone from the comfort of a chair in front of the screen.

Now I know that technology is a blessing,
I know we have many people watching online today who are sick or quarantining or otherwise
unable to get to worship.

But because of this,
we need to be reminded again and again,

that being a disciple of Jesus Christ **always** means being part of Christian community.

Why is this a challenge for us?

Well it's fairly obvious,

Community is hard,
Community means I have to be with other people who can be difficult,
And community means I don't always get my own way.

Isn't it interesting how Jesus has to tell the apostles,
'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place'.

I wonder whether this doesn't get at one of the challenges,
the temptation to withdraw or move on when things get difficult?

You can imagine the apostles,
all excited when they first came across a family who heard their message,
and received them into their home,

But then after a few days,
They started to notice the people's annoying habits and idiosyncrasies,
They couldn't ignore that strange smell around the place any more,

The honeymoon period wore off,

Maybe they met another family and they had nicer furniture, food and drink their place,
It seemed a bit cleaner,

So they're tempted to move on.

Jesus says no,

When they receive you,

That's where you stay as long as you're in that village.

There's something here about commitment to Christian community.

Of course, people in a local church will annoy you,
Everyone's annoying if you're around them long enough.

Of course, Christian community is challenging,
It's a group of sinners with little in common,
Except that they acknowledge they are sinners who rely on the grace of God.

This is how Christ Jesus has designed it.

The trial mission of the Apostles is inextricably bound up with a sense of community.

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THE FINAL LESSON – JESUS DEATH & RESURRECTION

So out they go,
to do what Jesus has sent them to do.

But remember,
This is not the final sending out,
This is only vicarage.

The Apostles will return to Jesus and he'll call them away on retreat to debrief,
As he still has much more to teach them.

More than that,
He still has his own mission to complete,
Before they can finally be sent out with the full Gospel message.

And this mission,
Is that he has come to give his life as a ransom for many,

To give his life, ***for you.***

He is a prophet,
But even more, he's the saviour.

For the one who here is rejected in his hometown,
Will finally be rejected by just about everyone.

The one who here is dishonoured as a prophet,
Will be dishonoured far more as he goes to his death.

The one who here is sarcastically called the carpenter,
Will have his hands and feet nailed to the wood of the cross.

And after he dies,

The one who here is disdainfully called the son of Mary,

Will be spoken of by a Roman centurion,

Who will say,

'Surely this man was the Son of God'.

And as the Son of God,

He didn't just die,

But he rose again.

He is the Son of Mary,

Who grew up unrecognized at Nazareth,

But he's also the Son of God,

Who comes to offer you a place in the family of God.

This trip is just a **trial run** for the Apostles,

Because the crucial part of the message is not yet in place.

Which is,

The death and resurrection of Christ Jesus for the forgiveness of sins,

This is what needs to happen before the Apostles can be sent into the whole world,

To proclaim the good news to all creation,

'That whoever believes and is baptised will be saved', Mark 16:16.

Let us never become too familiar with that message.

But no matter how familiar or unfamiliar you are with him right now,

Christ Jesus calls everyone of us here today to trust in him.

God grant it to us for Jesus' sake, Amen.