

Mark 6:1-13 | **Sermon 'Faith in the Power of Christ'**

Ezekiel 2:1-5 / Psalm 123 / 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 / Mark 6:1-13

Preached on 7 July 2024 at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Adelaide by Pastor Tom Pietsch

Heavenly Father, give us confidence in your promises, so that we may receive Jesus' power even through ordinary means. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The Obstacle of Unbelief

For some weeks we have been hearing Sunday Gospel readings from Mark. By the end of chapter 5 which we heard last Sunday, a significant momentum has been building around the ministry of Jesus, reaching the high point of Jesus healing and saving the haemorrhaging woman after she reached out to touch him, and then the raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead, or from 'sleep' as Jesus called it.

But in today's reading that momentum draws to something of a halt. The obstacle of unbelief prevents Jesus' power from being fully manifest among the people of his hometown. In contrast to the faith of the haemorrhaging woman reaching out to Jesus, or Jairus begging Jesus for mercy, now we hear of people who are scandalised by Jesus, or take offense at him. And it's in this context that Jesus sends out his apostles in mission, with the understanding that some will receive the Word in faith, and others won't. The varied audience Jesus received will be the same as the varied audience that the Church will receive.

With that broad summary of the text in mind, let's look more closely at this reading from Mark's Gospel.

Teaching on the Sabbath

The reading begins with Jesus coming to his hometown, a significant detail as we look at people's lack of faith in Him. On the Sabbath, Jesus goes into his hometown synagogue and begins to teach. People are astounded with what they hear, just as others have been astounded at Jesus' teaching (Mark 1:22; 11:18). But this hometown astonishment is different, because it turns to rejection. They're astounded in a negative way, expressed by a series of 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! Is 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 offense at him [or, literally, were scandalised by him]. (Mark 6:2-3)

It's noteworthy that their first question is a "where" question, a question of location. Where did he get all of this? For they find it especially hard to reconcile Jesus' mighty power with the fact that they know him, that he's from their hometown. What's fascinating is that they do here acknowledge the deed of power that Jesus does. But the extraordinary is mixed with the very ordinary and familiar. The two have come together and it throws them. This is the carpenter, after all, and we know his brothers and sisters.

The Scandal of Familiarity

This was a problem for Jesus' hometown, but it can also by extension be a challenge for people today to put their trust in Christ. That the extraordinary power of Christ, is made manifest in ordinary ways. We can call this, 'The Scandal of Familiarity' – that the great power of God occurs in particular, ordinary and familiar ways.

Many of you here have seen dozens or even hundred of baptisms. They're all done in more or less the same way, with normal water and familiar words. But in each baptism, someone is truly born again into God's kingdom for all eternity, covered by the righteousness of Christ. Or, take confession and absolution. Each week you're asked the same questions. And you respond in the same, familiar way: I do. I do. I do. And the same, familiar words are proclaimed to you. But in so doing, your sins are truly forgiven, taken away from you as far as east is from west, and you are restored to peace with God. Familiar, but extraordinary.

GK Chesterton loved meditating on the familiarity of God's extraordinary work. He once reflected on it this way:

[Children] always say, "Do it again"; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun, and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. The repetition in Nature may not be a mere recurrence; it may be a theatrical encore.

That's one man's way of bringing together the familiar and the extraordinary. And there are other ways too. For example, with our sacraments our holy rites, we can do well to make them beautiful and dignified. Not because God's power relies on it, but because it can help us to see the extraordinary power of God at work in the familiar, that Christ is with us as we are gathered in his name, and he is at work among us with power and grace.

In our current world we can be tempted to live in a disenchanted way, but in our Gospel we being led to see the world as the place where God's glory and power is made manifest. That He is at work doing extraordinary things in ordinary and familiar means. So much for the scandal of familiarity.

The Challenge of Jesus' Power

But there's another dimension of Jesus' hometown reception that we need to hear. In their series of doubting questions, the people of Jesus' hometown make the interesting exclamation: "What deeds of power are being done by his hands!" They weren't necessarily disputing the power of Christ, it's just they did not want to receive it, to put their trust in it. That's why we hear the text say that Jesus "could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief" (Mark 6:5-6). It's not that Jesus was lacking in power, but that there were only a few people who in faith held on to that power, or reached out to access his power like the haemorrhaging woman and Jairus had done.

There is a challenge that Jesus' power can present people and it can be a difficult challenge. It's not uncommon to find people today who can acknowledge the power of Christ, or the goodness of the Church in some way, but who nevertheless don't put their trust in it. You may be able to think of your own examples of this, but one example that came to my mind was that of Sir Kenneth Clark, a prominent English art historian who featured in the BBC television series *Civilisation* made in the 1960s. He did not live as a Christian, indeed he was a philanderer. But he wrote this in his autobiography:

I had a religious experience. It took place in the church of San Lorenzo, ... I can only say that for a few minutes, my whole being was radiated by a kind of heavenly joy, far more intense than anything I had ever experienced before. This state of mind lasted for several minutes ... but wonderful as it was, [it] posed an awkward problem in terms of action. My life was far from blameless. I would have to reform. My family would think I was going mad, and perhaps after all, it was a delusion, for I was in every way unworthy of such a flood of grace. Gradually the effect wore off and I made no effort to retain it. ... I was too deeply embedded in the world to change course.

It's a very candid account, and perhaps understandable even if shocking. Thanks be to God, when he was later dying, Kenneth Clark had a clergyman come, and was baptized into the church on his deathbed. But this earlier rejection mirrors Jesus' rejection in his hometown. They acknowledged his power, but it would have overturned too much of their lifestyle, clashed with their prior understandings which they held dear.

Christ's Power in the Church

And it's in this context, that Jesus then sends out his apostles into the world, giving them authority over unclean spirits, and with the charge that they are to call people to repentance, even if, like Sir Kenneth Clark, people don't want to repent.

While there are many dimensions of this apostolic sending we could meditate on, the one dimension I want to focus on at the end of this sermon, is that the power of Christ continues in the world, through the church. Jesus' authority is an authority that he hands on to the twelve, who then hand it on to pastors, serving the church, even unto our day, and until Christ returns in glory.

Now Christ certainly prepares his apostles, and prepares us, for a mixed reception. Just as many did not put their trust in Christ, so too there will be people who will refuse to hear the apostles, and, by extension, will refuse to listen to the church. As St Paul put it:

For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound teaching, but, having their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. (2 Tim 4:3-4)

Jesus wants us to know about this reception, as a part of his love and pastoral care for us, in part so that it doesn't discourage us. There will be rejection of the Gospel, at Capernaum, as the apostles preached, and in our day and age.

But regardless of this, the power of Christ goes on. Earlier I said that this unbelief is an obstacle for Jesus. But it's an obstacle only insofar as the unbelieving refuse to be healed, or cured or saved – the very things that Jesus wants for all people. But the power of Jesus continues, the mission of the church goes on. No matter what the reception, no matter how apparently familiar or challenging, the Word of the Lord will endure forever.

And it is enduring today. Did you notice in our reading that Christ did his teaching, gave his wisdom, and attested to deeds of power all on Sabbath, in the synagogue. Today Christ is doing the same work, on our Sabbath, the day of Resurrection, in the church. Our faith may be as small as a mustard seed, but faith that size is full of power, because it taps into the source of power and grace, Jesus Christ.

In the name of Christ. Amen.

And may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.