

Jesus – according to Mark’s record of events – has been ‘healing up a storm.’ Not to mention calming a storm. From the end of what we know as chapter 4 in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has calmed the waters to the amazement of his boat-bound disciples, driven a legion of evil spirits into an unsuspecting posse of pigs, brought the daughter of a synagogue official back from the brink of death, and brought wholeness and peace to an anonymous woman whose twelve year ordeal is ended by her risk of faith. This is an admirable resume for any holy person – and certainly enough to raise the profile of this Nazarene rabbi.

It’s no wonder that Jesus has turned for home. For a well earned rest, perhaps - some home cooking is always welcome after a busy time away. The reasons don’t matter, but we can all appreciate that Jesus may have been looking forward to something like a happy homecoming. He’s even been invited to preach...

He left that place and came to his home town, and his disciples followed him. On 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! 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 offence at him. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.’

***And he 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 6:1-6)

Let’s take a minute to digest this: “...he (Jesus) could do no deeds of power there...” Well, fine – he healed a few sick people – small cheese when set against

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the litany of liberation and miracle work that precedes this strangest of homecomings...but there it is. Jesus, home for a break – home for a rest – and what he gets is grief.

“Isn’t that the carpenter’s kid? Isn’t that Mary’s boy? Listen to him talk – where does THAT come from? The subtext is familiar to any small-town resident who has ever returned after broadening their horizons (or worse, leaving a mark on the wider world...)

Yes, we want to claim our home-town heroes, but have you noticed, we do that on our terms? We do it according to what (and who) they **were**, rather than honouring what they have become? (*‘I remember when...’ conversations dominate those welcome home memorials, in my experience*)

It is important to note that Jesus’ reception was based on his past – not his present (or even his future.) Yes, history is important (as we are still learning in this country) and yes, people need to be held accountable for their past deeds – but when JESUS come back home, and the reception is so skeptical that he can do no deeds of power??? The message here has nothing to do with the messenger, and everything to do with the audience.

Presumption is the enemy of illumination. No amount of good news can penetrate a reluctant set of ears. No amount of education can change a stubborn mind. No amount of grace can open the locked doors of personal bias, or arrogant ignorance. Not even if the bearer of grace – the teacher – the light-in-darkness – is JESUS HIMSELF.

Does this change the way we might bring the gospel? Does this have any bearing on our witness to the glorious revelation of God that is the constant miracle of every moment of every day? Are we (and this is hard to say from this pulpit) putting too much confidence/emphasis/etc. on the delivery – with no regard to the reception?

The short and ugly answer is yes.

I'm ordained to WORD and Sacrament; heavy on the word. I know that I need to pay attention to those who are hearing that word - but usually (I confess) that means trying to find the RIGHT words. And sometimes, there are no words. At least, none that I can offer.

Listening, sharing, seeking understanding of one another - all this is crucial too. So is knowing when to 'cut and run.' Jesus understood the resistance. Jesus accepted that there was no room for what he had to offer in his home town - so once again, he took to the road.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If 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.' So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. (Mark 6:7-13)

So out among the villages they go – discouraged by a humbling homecoming; determined to 'keep up the good work.' And straight into an object lesson. Jesus confers authority on his disciples, and offers them a very specific set of instructions: "Take nothing with you..." A staff (sure), and sandals (naturally), but only one tunic. No bag. No food. No money. And most importantly, NO EXPECTATIONS.

That's the leap of logic that I make.

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Having discovered that not even Jesus can reveal deeds of power if the listeners are not receptive, it follows that these 'unknown fellows,' even in pairs, can't expect miracles at every turn.

The project is vast – the possibilities are endless – expect the unexpected; and don't imagine that you can instantly alter people's expectations. That feels like the message Jesus offers his disciples.

The (so-called) rejection of Jesus - by those who knew him of old - is what leads me to this conclusion. Jesus failure to do (or reveal) any great deeds of power was - I suggest - a result of the strange expectations of his fellow Nazarenes. They were not ready to put aside 'what they knew' to consider what was before them. Jesus warns his disciples that they will face the same problems. And he suggests there is nothing to be done except 'shake the dust off your feet' as you leave.

Harsh, that is; maybe even a little extreme. So unlike the image we have of Christian virtue...

Where's the grace? Where's the determination - the stalwart preaching of the gospel in and out of season? Where is the long-suffering servant of the good news in this episode?

Nowhere.

Jesus 'lesson' is that the world is full of listeners - and while you should tune your message to the ears of those who are in front of you, you can't tune their ears to your message, no matter what that message may be - no matter what your pedigree is. So where does that leave us?

Jesus is still sending us out - urging us beyond the safety of the sanctuary - to live God's holy vision into reality. It has not been what you would call a wildly successful mission so far.

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Yes, moments of joy and glimpses of grace - legacies of love do linger, thanks to generations of faithful servants and those whose engagement with the principles of justice, grace and love were sincere. But equally real is the trail of tears and terror blazed by those who thought they knew better than their 'audience' what was necessary. Every day we are reminded of the cost of righteous arrogance - the cost of not knowing when the message and the expectations could not be reconciled. Distorted truth is the result of those times when 'the righteous' insisted that their vision was God's vision. We will always be paying the price for the twisted trade that required a cultural transplant so we could call mission work 'successful.' When our desires are distanced from God's love; when our insistence - our expectations - are predicated on authority that we presume to have, no good can result. Jesus weeps at our stubborn pride. He would be amazed at our unbelief.

It's too bad that Jesus charge to the disciples at the conclusion of Matthew's gospel did not include this reminder. Probably the most poisonous verse in Scripture is that commission to 'make disciples of all nations...' It became a commandment; (no matter that the gospels had already suggested Jesus distillation of the commandments down to two - Love God - love your neighbour...) an invitation to revelation which the church has used as a weapon of conquest - with little regard for any of the conquered except that 'we [the church] know what's best - trust us.' To borrow a phrase from a friend of mine, that's not good policy.

Jesus' gentleness shortened his homecoming. No use staying to convince the reluctant. Love them and leave them - there were still stories to tell - still wonders to reveal. His story-telling took him to the cross - through the darkness of death - and into the reality of God's enduring, life-giving love.

And no one expected that.