

St Mary's Church, South Ealing

When we think today of 'fame', I expect we see images of movie stars like Tom Cruise or Julia Roberts, pop stars like Britney Spears, Madonna, the Beatles, world leaders like the Queen, Tony Blair, George Bush. A basic definition of 'fame' might be, 'when lots of people know who you are, without ever having met you.'

I don't suppose many of us know what that's like. As a child, I experienced 'fame'. My Dad was the local vicar, and I went to the local church school, which was in his parish. He regularly visited the school to do assemblies and so on. And so, as his son, every person in that school knew my name and who I was. It's an eerie experience, talking to someone you've never met, yet who knows who you are and what your name is.

So let's do our best to imagine what fame must have been like for Jesus. If he thought things were bad when he was in chapter one – it's nothing compared to chapter two and beyond. By chapter six there are multitudes of thousands of people

crowding around him!

The beginning of chapter one describes the start of Jesus' ministry. After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, 'proclaiming the good news of God,' which was, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news.' Like John, Jesus called his fellow Jews to turn back to God – that is the literal meaning of 'repent': to turn back.

Then Jesus calls his own followers. The first ones were fishermen, called Simon, Andrew, James and John. Without question they left their entire livelihoods and followed him. I can't quite imagine what my wife would say if I announced I was quitting my job to wander around the countryside, following an itinerant preacher from Brighton. But they did! (Although Jesus came from Nazareth, not Brighton.)

Then Jesus and his followers went to Capernaum. On the first Sabbath, Jesus went into the synagogue and taught. The people there were astounded by his teaching – some because they loved what he said, and others because they hated it. It isn't

long before the Pharisees start plotting against him.

And so Jesus' fame begins with teaching. But what makes him really famous are the miracles. On the same day that he's teaching in the synagogue, a man possessed by a demon enters the building. The demon recognises who Jesus really is, and cries out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' By naming Jesus as God's son, the demon hopes to have power over him. But Jesus silences the demon, and commands it to come out of the man. And it does!

This is what really amazes the people. 'Not only does he have authority when he teaches,' they whisper, 'but he has authority over unclean spirits!' And pretty soon the whispers spread like wildfire across the surrounding region, whispers that only grew louder with the news that he'd healed the mother-in-law of one of his followers.

As soon as the Sabbath was over – at sunset – and the rules prohibiting travel no longer applied, people came in droves to Peter's front door. In fact the whole city came! Jesus healed the

sick and cast out demons. His fame and popularity exploded from nowhere – I believe the expression is ‘from zero to hero’.

It’s hard to imagine a modern parallel to this. Perhaps the best is a young gifted footballer. First, he plays for his school team, and people are impressed by his natural ability. Then he starts to play for one of the local teams, and becomes a local hero, helping the team to victories. Soon he’s noticed by one of the big Premiership clubs, who sign him up as the next big thing – and before long he’s playing in the national side, receiving national and international awards.

His fame is now such that he’s recognised wherever he goes. He can’t go out in public any more, except heavily disguised, because of the throngs of people that surround him wherever he goes, wanting his autograph. All this in a matter of days!

It’s not really surprising then to find Jesus desperate for some quiet and solitude, for some time with his Father. In verse 35, we read, Jesus sneaks out of the house in the dead of night and wanders off to a deserted place to pray. But there’s more to Jesus’ late-night foray than sheer escapism.

Hours later, the disciples (and the rest of Capernaum) discover that Jesus is missing. No doubt desperate for Jesus to continue all the healings (and for their own celebrity to grow, no doubt), the disciples search high-and-low for him. They eventually find him in his place of prayer. The fact that they knew to look for him there suggests that he regularly went off on his own to pray.

Their terse statement of fact when they find him shows how irritated they were by his actions. 'Everyone is searching for you,' they say, 'How dare you sneak off like this, there's business to be done healing people and casting out demons.' No doubt they expected Jesus to return to Capernaum with them, repentant for his selfishness and desire for solitude.

Jesus' reply is what tells us that there was more to his late-night venture than sheer escapism. 'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns,' he says, 'so that I may *proclaim the message* there also; for *that* is what I came out to do.' He had needed the time to re-focus himself on his mission. It wasn't easy for him to do this. Don't for a second think that Jesus' temptations ended in chapter 1, verse 13. He wrestled his whole life with the

temptation not to be faithful to his mission, the end of which could only be pain and rejection.

You see, he could have gone around Galilee healing everyone who was sick, exorcising every demon. He had that power. And, as we see in the intimacy of the second passage, Jesus had the compassion. As the leper knelt before him, begging to be healed, Jesus touched him, making himself 'ritually unclean' and risking infection himself. Then he gave the word, and the man was healed. He had the power, and he had the compassion. So why didn't Jesus go around healing as many people as he could, casting out every demon?

A clue is in the beginning of verse 41. Some of the oldest manuscripts we have use *orgistheis* instead of *splagchnistheis*, 'filled with anger' instead of 'filled with pity'. But Jesus wasn't angry at the man for approaching him, because he reached out and touched him, showing his compassion by simple human touch. Rather, he was angry at the power of evil to corrupt and destroy, at this point demonstrated by the leper's skin disease.

If Jesus had simply gone around healing people, what good

would it have done them? They would have fallen ill again, they would still have died. Evil would still have had power over them, even if driven out temporarily by Jesus' power. Jesus had come to deal with the root cause of all the disease that surrounded him, to conquer the demons that took possession of people every day. He had come to fight evil, *to the death*.

But dealing with this evil meant becoming a curse himself. It meant being cut off from everyone, even his own Father. It meant utter rejection and unimaginable suffering. And if he wanted, he could have avoided it all. If Jesus had decided simply to be a healer, he would never have attracted the hostility of the official powers. History would have been so much different, and Jesus' life would have been so much easier.

As we know, Jesus did remain faithful to his mission, which was far more than miracles and exorcisms. He had come to announce the good news of the coming of God's kingdom, of the imminence of the defeat of evil. His miracles were a symptom of his message that evil was being defeated. By his proclamations, he announced that the kingdom was coming, and taught people how to recognise it; by his miracles, he both

demonstrated the truth of his words, and actually advanced the coming of the kingdom.

Perhaps now we begin to see the temptation that Jesus faced throughout his life, and why he needed regular time praying to and being strengthened by his Father. The relatively easier, and more spectacular task of healing was second to his task of proclamation.

And yet, at this stage of the story, it was his miracles that attracted the most attention. Actions really do speak louder than words, it seems. Instead of obeying Jesus' command to present himself to the priest, the now-ex-leper did some proclaiming of his own, and as a result Jesus couldn't even enter a town openly because of the people that crowded around him.

Everywhere Jesus went he was presented with situations that must have 'pulled his heart strings', tremendous human suffering that he had the power to alleviate, if only for a short while. Wherever he went he was surrounded by people, desperate for him to spend all his time healing them (and some of them desperate for him to lead them in military victory over



the Romans, of course). And yet he remained faithful to his task, faithful to the very end, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God, come at last, performing mighty works to demonstrate and usher in the kingdom's coming.

These stories are not propositional theology. Neither are they moralistic. They *are* intimate stories about Jesus. We see a glimpse of the effect his healing power and authority had on those around him, and the tremendous temptation he must have had to use them in the wrong way. It is often said, 'power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely.' But in Jesus' case it didn't. He remained faithful to the end, despite what must have been almost unbearable temptation along the way.

These brief stories in Mark serve to give us a renewed appreciation and understanding of what our Lord did for us, for the whole world. The more times I read about Jesus in the Gospels, the more I'm struck by his awesome humility and *faithfulness*. Of all the people we would today class as 'famous' – footballers, movie stars, pop stars, political leaders – how many of them remain truly humble in their fame? Certainly not many. When we stand them next to Jesus, they fall woefully short of

the mark as role models.

As we approach Lent, the time in the Christian calendar specially set aside for reflection and abstinence, let it be our resolve to have the same mind as Christ Jesus, the mind of humility and love, and above all of faithfulness to his Father. Let us not be examples of the mind of pride and self-serving greed.

And how did Jesus achieve all that he did? It's right there at the start of our reading: 'In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.' I'm not saying get up at 3am every day, but I am stressing the sheer importance of prayer for Christian life. We literally can't *do* without it. And so, let us pray.

*Our loving heavenly Father, your only Son teaches us so much. Thank-you for the records we have of what he said and did. Thank-you for your Holy Spirit, by whom, through whom and in whom, we know you and your Son personally, and not through the written word alone.*

*Please help us as we struggle with temptation in our day-to-day lives. Help us to pray, to draw strength from you every day, in every situation. And help us always to imitate your Son, the only perfect example of love, humility and faithfulness. Transform us into his image more and more each day. Amen.*