

So far in Mark's gospel, Jesus has performed some pretty good miracles. He's cast out a few demons, healed a paralytic – and forgiven his sins – calmed a storm, brought a young girl back to life, and so on. And he's given some good teaching as well. He's taught about fasting, about his own mission, about the kingdom, about ourselves.

So you'd be forgiven for expecting things to be 'business as usual' in Nazareth, Jesus' home town. I'm sure that's what his disciples were expecting. Imagine their anticipation as they entered each new town to announce this new, breathtaking message, to heal the sick and cast out demons.

Their expectations on entering Nazareth must have been sky-high; after all, Jesus had just brought someone back to life! The Greek strongly suggests that Jesus went straight to Nazareth from the synagogue-ruler's house. There is almost a breathless speed to much of Mark's gospel, which only serves to heighten the sense of anticipation, both for us and for the disciples.

And yet, there have already been hints of something darker. The scribes and Pharisees were already plotting against

Jesus, and some people thought him mad, or possessed. Perhaps some of Jesus' disciples remembered that incident, and that it was Jesus' own family who came to restrain him. As the readers of Mark's gospel, that episode serves as a dark introduction to this passage: perhaps things will not go well in Jesus' home town after all.

The result of what does happen taught the disciples a vital lesson, one which we would do well to learn today.

In verse 2 of our passage today, Jesus repeats the pattern of going into the synagogue to preach. It was the customary meeting-place for local Jews, who would often debate, or listen to travelling rabbis.

Back in chapter 1, Jesus went into the synagogue in Capernaum, and taught them. They were astounded at his teaching, which was given with authority, unlike the scribes. They saw him cast out a demon, and as a result brought all the town's sick before him for healing.

Here in chapter 6, the story begins to lead us in – apparently – the same direction. The people of Nazareth were astounded (that's the same word as for the people of

Capernaum) by Jesus' teaching, and ask each other, 'What is this?', just as they had in Capernaum.

But verse 3 betrays their reaction for what it truly is. In Capernaum the reaction was, 'Wow! What is this?! It's fantastic – quick, bring all the sick!' But in Nazareth, 'What is this? It's ridiculous: *how dare he?* We know him. He's just a carpenter. His family still live with us. How *dare* he?' Their mocking voices cried out, 'Where did he hear all this nonsense, what is this "wisdom" that has been given to him?'

Mark sums it up: 'they took offence at him'. They stumbled because they thought they knew him. They reacted in such a way that they turned a rock to stand on into a stone to trip over. Why did they react so differently to the people in Capernaum?

The people of Nazareth thought they knew who Jesus was. They had grown up with him, he was just an illegitimate carpenter – note the lack of reference to Joseph in verse 3. It was not because Joseph had died that they didn't mention him. It was normal to refer to men as the son of the father, whether or not the father was alive. No, the

Nazarenes were insulting Jesus: ‘How can you speak to us, you who have no father?’

The Nazarenes thought they knew Jesus. His family still lived with them. They were just an average family, in an average town. Like people everywhere, once they had convinced themselves they knew the truth, even Jesus couldn’t persuade them otherwise.

This acts as a warning. It is entirely possible for human beings to look Truth in the eye and call him a Liar. That’s what happened in Nazareth. It seems incredible, but that’s what they did – no wonder Jesus was amazed.

That warning works in two ways. First, we ourselves can be blinded by our own ignorance into thinking we are wise, by our own lies into thinking they are true. And second, other people can be like that too, and once they reach that point, there is almost no way back. Our mission activities will fall on deaf ears. How can we persuade people of the truth, when they have convinced themselves it is a lie?

So what can we do to stop ourselves behaving like the Nazarenes when confronted with the truth? We must be prepared for it. Although God is of course never

inconsistent, he is often unpredictable, and cynicism is a great weapon of the enemy. We can so easily dismiss what we aren't expecting, what doesn't fit in with what we already know.

The Nazarenes were not expecting a carpenter to return to them, performing miracles and calling them to repent of their sins. They were certainly not expecting him to do things that only God can do, like forgiving sins.

I wonder what you don't expect God to do. Do you expect him to heal the sick? To break through barriers of resistance? Do you expect him to bring peace to the world? To change people's lives? Do you expect him to honour your courage when you step out into the unknown, to give you strength, to answer prayer?

If you find yourself dismissing something in the Church by saying something like, 'God would never do that,' then it's time to stop and start praying. We should not presume to tell God what he can and cannot do – or what he should and shouldn't do. To attempt to do that will surely result in us calling the Truth a Lie.

Other people are one of the main ways that we can keep ourselves in check. People who love us enough to tell us to shut up, or lovingly and gently bring our attention to the log in our own eye. We need to do that for each other, having the courage to tell people when we think they're out of line, or wrong. The Holy Spirit will help us in this, give us the words and the courage to do it.

This should never be vindictive – if you find yourself enjoying rebuking someone, you should stop immediately: you are not the person for the job. Such a difficult task should not be undertaken lightly, but with extreme seriousness and prayer. It does, however, need to be done within the body of Christ to keep ourselves on the straight and narrow.

The other main way we can keep ourselves in check is by immersing ourselves in Scripture, through which the Holy Spirit teaches and admonishes us. By doing this, we can be sure of our ground when we rebuke others, and help to guard ourselves against error. For the more we read about what God has done in the past, the more we will be able to recognise what he will do in the future. Even though it may be unpredictable, it won't be inconsistent. The more we

learn what God can do, the more we will expect him to do in the future, and therefore not be caught unawares when he surprises us.

So, to keep ourselves from rejecting the Truth as a Lie, we need others, and we need Scripture. The power behind both is the Holy Spirit, working within the Church to prepare her for her future as the bride of Christ.

What about others then, outside the Church, to whom we are called to proclaim the good news about Jesus? How can we stop ourselves being discouraged when the message is unilaterally rejected?

Well, first of all, we can be *encouraged* that Jesus himself struggled in Nazareth. Jesus himself was amazed at the unbelief of the Nazarenes. Do not be surprised if people take offence against you for no apparent reason, or if they simply dismiss you out of hand. It happened to Jesus – it will happen to you. The Bible tells us that our lives will conform to the pattern of Jesus' life – with difficulty and pain, but also new life and power.

Jesus warned his disciples about this before he sent them away. [*Read verse 11*] He wasn't warning them against the

stubbornness of first-century Jews, but the stubbornness of people everywhere. Although Mark doesn't mention any failures, I'm sure the disciples had many in this phase of their training. In kingdom work, failure goes hand-in-hand with success, because Satan, the ruler of this world, will not go without a fight. This side of heaven, we are engaged in a great battle, making good the victory Jesus won, helping bring the kingdom of the future into the present. God's kingdom is breaking out of the future by the power of the Holy Spirit, but not without resistance. In mission, failure always goes hand-in-hand with success.

But failure is not entirely bad. God turns that failure into something good, using it to train us to be more successful in the future. Through the disappointment at Nazareth, the disciples could appreciate the cost of success, and be encouraged in their own mission. Without the experience of Nazareth first, how depressed the disciples would have been when they encountered their first failures. Instead, Jesus gives them instructions to 'shake the dust from their feet' on leaving a town that rejects their message. [Explain shaking dust here] They are able to move on to the next town, disappointed perhaps, but not discouraged.



Do you expect God to work in and through you to bring others to him? To do new things through you? Do you trust in the power of the good news to save people, to awaken faith in them? I know it's something that I find difficult. I recognise that these words are as much for me as they are for you.

The risk of failure for most of us outweighs any faith we have in the gospel. It should not be so. The only way out of that difficulty is actually to risk that failure, to risk the message falling on deaf ears, to risk rejection; for only in taking that risk do we have any chance of success. And only in success will we be encouraged, and the easier it will be to step out a second time, and so on. Bishop Mike of Bristol put it like this. You have to put yourself in situations where, if God doesn't show up, you're stuffed. Only then will you learn to rely on God's power and strength, not your own.

Jesus gave us a task, to proclaim the good news about the kingdom of God to all nations, to baptise and disciple the whole world. And he gave us a promise, that he would give us the words say, and that the proclamation would be accompanied by signs and wonders. All of this is only

possible by the power of the Holy Spirit, in us and in those we are evangelising. God has promised, and it is his responsibility, to provide us with the courage to speak out, the words to speak, the power to heal. All we have to do is step out – to put ourselves in situations where, if God doesn't turn up, we're stuffed.

That's what the disciples learned, and they learned that sometimes even the teachings and miracles of Jesus could be rejected. But that is no reason to stop, but a reason to move on, to continue our mission to the world, proclaiming and demonstrating the good news of Jesus Christ, sent by the Father, who died and was raised, who sent us his Spirit of power from on high.

Bringing in the Kingdom of God is hard work – the hardest – but it is what we have been called, and *commanded* to do.

Let's pray.

*Lord of the Kingdom, you came to show us the way, and you give us the power to follow. Send your Spirit on us now, we pray. We need but a little faith, and your great power and might will do the rest. Please stoke the fire of our faith, turn*

*the flame into a roaring fire, as we step out to join you in making your Kingdom come here on earth. Amen.*