

SPREADING THE FAITH

By: Les Baird

At: All Saints' Church, Belmont Domain, Lower Hutt.

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About: Mark 6: 1 -13, 2 Corinthians 12: 2-10

Lost in the familiar

I wonder if you have ever found yourself driving in an unfamiliar town, perhaps in bad weather, perhaps at night, in heavy traffic, with motorway lights sending reflections every which way. It can be a bit scary. It happened to me one evening not long ago. Trouble was, I was in Lower Hutt, in Queens Drive, outside St James' Church, where as many of you know, I worked for 11 years, and can quite often be found on a Sunday morning. For a moment I was scared, even though I was surrounded by the familiar. Sometimes, the familiar does not work out in the way we had come to expect.

In today's passage from the Gospel, we read about Jesus, who had just begun his ministry of teaching and preaching and healing, coming to his home-town, where he had grown up, where he had worked alongside his father as village carpenter, where his family still lived. Here, you might suppose, he and his message might receive an enthusiastic welcome. But it wasn't to be that way!

A Prophet without honour

In today's reading from Mark, we see that Jesus was amazed at their lack of faith. There was so much that they questioned about Jesus. They asked where his wisdom came from. They pointed to his family who lived among them, and were apparently quite ordinary people. They seemed to think that he therefore had no right to be doing and saying what he was doing and saying. They were, I think, beginning to sense the challenge that arose from the presence of Jesus among them, and they weren't sure



that they wanted it, weren't sure that they could cope with it. So much so that we read in Luke's gospel, after Jesus had spoken in the Synagogue, the people of Nazareth took him out the brow of a hill with the intention of throwing him over the cliff. This was their reaction to good news. This was their reaction to Jesus announcing the coming of the Kingdom of God, God's rule.

What really upset them was that when Jesus spoke in the synagogue, he announced that the good news of the gospel was to be proclaimed, not just to the people of Israel, but to all people.

Jesus finds their attitude frustrating - indeed, not just frustrating, but limiting. Their lack of faith prevented him from doing any miracles there, Mark tells us. The people of his hometown did indeed, treat him without honour as the saying, apparently well-known in Jesus time, predicted.

Enlisting help

Now, in the second part of today's reading, Jesus moves from a solo mission to a shared ministry. The 12 he has chosen to accompany him on his mission are about to become independent missionaries - well not exactly independent. Firstly, he sends them out not alone but in pairs, and rather than allowing them to act as they might feel they should, they are to operate within strict guidelines which he was to give them.

I don't think that it is just to bore us that gospels record all these detailed instructions that Jesus gave them. There were instructions about what to take with them, and where to stay and what to say to people. I think I would have been saying - hey boss, I can work that out for myself, just tell me what you want done and let me get on with it. But I think St Mark is telling us that these disciples were specifically sent out by Jesus - they went out on his authority and they went out trusting and obeying his instructions. And for the gospel writers, those instructions that Jesus gave them had very specific purposes. Clearly, the role of these roving teachers was not to make themselves rich - they were to take only the minimum of equipment with them. They were indeed to enter into a sharing relationship with the people they were to minister to. They would be dependent on the people for all their needs. Once they had chosen a place to stay, they weren't to move to different accommodation until it was time to leave that place. Why that restriction? I think so that would not be seen as bestowing honour or a prize on those whose house they chose to stay in.

Establishing a Partnership

What I am hearing in these two passages from Mark's gospel is that the work that Jesus was setting out to do, the work of proclaiming the kingdom of God, was not to be a solo enterprise. The lack of a willing partnership with the people of Nazareth hampered Jesus' work there. God's work could only be done in partnership with the people.

The work of teaching and preaching and healing that Jesus set out to do in Galilee needed a partnership too. Jesus selected 12 men to become those mission partners, to carry out the work of the kingdom. They willingly took on the tasks that Jesus had set out for them to do. Their mission, too, had some considerable success as we read in Luke chapter 9. In contrast to those in Nazareth, these men joined in a willing partnership with Jesus. As a result, the message of the kingdom began to be effectively spread.

Later, the work of the disciples was continued by another, a man named Paul, who wrote about his experiences in the letter he wrote, the letter we call the 2nd letter to the Corinthians. And here he talks about finding the strength he needed to do the work of spreading the Gospel. Despite a physical illness, despite all kinds of difficulties, Paul found that if he was doing God's work, no matter how weak he felt, indeed, in the times when he felt most weak, Christ made him strong.



A continuing task

When we look at the Church today, we see grand buildings. We see Bishops and Priests and all kinds of other office-holders and officials. We even see the odd Administrator. But it didn't start out that way. It started with a tradesman's son from a small village in the middle east. It started with a group of Israeli peasants and fishermen and an Inland Revenue official that the tradesman's son recruited to help. It started with rejection and misunderstanding. Yet from this unlikely beginning came the continuing passing on of the message of hope and freedom and love and healing that is repeated throughout the world this and every day.

God still seeks men and women to work in partnership with Him, to continue to pass on that message. God promises that, even in their greatest weakness, he will make them strong.