



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, July 5, 2009
The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

*Choral Eucharist
at 11am*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Robert H. Stafford
on
Saint Mark 6:1-6

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*A SERMON FOR
THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST*

“...And Jesus came into his own country...” (6.1)

The Evangelist Mark records this morning that Jesus has returned to the town in which he grew up and also worked as a carpenter, Nazareth.

One would, therefore, expect his homecoming to be a warm and gracious welcome, especially for someone of his stature in Israel.

Instead of being embraced with acceptance, Jesus is today greeted with indifference and rejection; “a prophet...without honor in his own country...” (v. 4).

This lack of hospitality, an insult in his culture, is heightened when we hear someone in the crowd mutter, “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary...?” (v. 3).

Whether this remark is real or fanciful to the incident, I cannot say. But, I think Mark is prompting us a bit with this ironic sarcasm; as if to say, could the Son of God ever be something as lowly or as humble as a simple carpenter, the child of a peasant couple? How ridiculous! Impossible!

Furthermore, and most importantly, Mark records that those assembled to meet Jesus were “offended” (6.3) by him; the Greek word employed here [*skandalizai*] being the same word from which is derived our English word *scandal*.

In other words, our Lord’s presence in Nazareth is perceived by many who knew him or his family as scandalous.

Obviously, a boundary of some sort has been violated by this sacred visitor, who is both like them and different.

What might that boundary be?

The answer to that question, in my estimation, lies in who Jesus is and what he brings.

The townspeople, I think, are fearful that Jesus of Nazareth will attempt, if given the chance, to make of them something they are not.

He may be Mary's son. He may have been a local carpenter. But, he is also someone more: "a great prophet" says the text. And, if word that is spreading throughout Israel about him is correct, very possibly, he may be Messiah, the Son of God.

So, most likely, the Nazarenes are troubled by Jesus' emerging power and authority in Israel; what he does and teaches being different than what they know. Fear, therefore, holds them back, closes them off, and shuts Jesus out.

What harm might this great prophet bring?

Let me begin with the obvious.

He is one of them. And as fellow Jews, they share the same religious identity.

One of the things that religious identity provides is difference with non-believers and secular culture. This is because organized religion at some level operates in part to preserve or to safeguard the sacred *status quo* against assimilation. For example, the practice of not eating meat on the Fridays of Lent once differentiated Roman Catholics from Protestants: kosher laws originally defined Jews from non-Jews, especially when the Jews were captive people and subject to foreign laws and power.

To abstain from certain people, things, or practices in the name of religion, what we call *taboos*, is a way therefore of keeping one's religious identity and heritage conscious and alive, as it invokes choice and separation; the difference between Jew and Greek, slave and free, clean and unclean, being examples.

This taboo of religious separatism, I think, is the boundary Jesus not only threatens but collapses. And, in so doing, he also brings into question the spiritual identity of the Nazarenes or anyone to whom he comes.

Something, I am saying, in *who Jesus* is and *what he brings* invites a reassessment or reappraisal of the role of religion and believing around this dynamic of the need for separatism. This is because what Jesus offers is, also who he is, that being, a new way: and more than that, he brings a new understanding and experience of relationship with God, self and others; a new commandment, as he calls it in Scripture.

Instead of religion as difference and exclusion, I am saying, Jesus is religion as inclusion and assimilation. Understandably, this can be upsetting to people schooled and raised otherwise, as the Nazarenes were. Jesus, therefore, is outside their experience and understanding, and the Nazarenes are afraid of losing their religious identity; in other words, who they are in relationship to God.

The tension in today's Gospel, I am saying, therefore, is between belief as an object and belief as an experience of the living God. The Nazarenes have objectified religion. Hence, they are not open or willing to stretch out their arms to embrace and receive the prophet of good news standing in their midst, who is ironically one of them, and whose way to God is to live mercy, forgiveness, and peace in a world in which all are brothers and sisters of the one, true God.

For Christ, this disappointing return to his own country must have been a crucifixion of sorts.

What, therefore, Mark paints for us this morning is a portrait of men and women of any time or place, large or small, ancient or modern, whose godly vision isn't much broader or encompassing than the end of their nose. It is an unflattering picture of our selves whenever we are locked into fear and preconception, self-righteousness and prejudice, wherein, we come to view even those familiar to us as possible rivals and usurpers of the sanctity of our prized and guarded religious or moral *status quo*.

Jesus, while visiting Nazareth has innocently entered, in other words, something ugly about the kingdom of this world and how it seeks to organize us and our institutions over and against others, who are made to bear the suffering we cannot shoulder for ourselves. What Mark gives us is a clue to a potentially fatal dynamic and disorder that we see more clearly and more tragically played out at our Lord's passion and death later in Jerusalem.

The very presence of Jesus amongst the Nazarenes today exposes the human scandal behind many of the Gospel accounts; a wrong in which we also participate; reminding us that the kingdom of men is under the control of fear, violence, and death; a truth that the Nazarenes cannot or will not at this point either see or grasp because of their sincere delusion. So, Jesus, the innocent one, who knows no separation from his Heavenly Father, therefore, becomes the scapegoat in the situation, a man to be judged, rejected, and cast out; a victim falsely sacrificed; all of it a sign of old time religion! How ridiculous! Impossible!

But, sometimes, with God, the ridiculous and the impossible are simply divine opportunity and invitation for intervention to change the course of people, places, things, and events as well as meaning; for example, like bread and wine in the hands of Jesus at supper with his disciples.

So, part of the messianic purpose of Jesus is to bring into question our fears and preconceptions, our prejudices and self-righteousness, our powerlessness and foolishness. In so doing, he overturns or deflates the power of the kingdom of this world, the status quo and the need to separate and exclude, liberating us, in other words, from our captivity to fear, violence, and death as a way of life; a bondage from which Christ and the Gospel writers call us to turn again and again, that God may bring us to eternal life through mercy, forgiveness, and peace.

So strong was unbelief in Nazareth, that Jesus we are told, could do little there apart from heal a few sick people (6.5). Like Ninevah, true righteousness was in short supply.

Mark records that Jesus leaves Nazareth behind, much like we our selves must do with the people, places, things, and events of our lives that want to bind us to belonging and servitude to fear, violence, and death. So, he goes on to other villages and towns (6.6) in the vicinity; a journey that will ultimately bring his footsteps to Jerusalem, where he will once again be a scandal and judgment; this time to religious men at the heart of Judaism itself, to his own disciples, and the absolute political power of imperial Rome.

Herein, we are reminded, that the Church itself of any age, must turn from false belief and unfaithfulness if it is to be true and welcoming to its Lord and founder. This means that fear, violence, and death as it manifests itself in separatism and prejudice cannot and must not be construed as a way of truth for the believer or as a religious norm for the institution of religion; for example as it was in the Spanish Inquisition or the witch hunts of Salem, Massachusetts. It also means that both believer and Church must integrate or assimilate elements from outside their boundaries and comfort zone, difficult as this may be, if faith is to be grown and developed; faith not being an object but a relationship. And,

relationships, as we all know, even with God, change. They are mystery. And, mystery is sometimes very difficult to live in, with, and through.

As Episcopalians and Anglicans, we are currently arguing about this rather publically, as is our custom. I am speaking of human identity and the nature of marriage. This discussion is no easy matter, and it is not without much debate and controversy on all sides.

How much of the world do we as believers and the Church want to assimilate seems to be at the heart of the controversy.

Today's Gospel, I find, brings a question to mind as we try to sort this out.

Has God in this controversy perhaps simply entered our Nazareth world of religion and believing and in so doing by that sacred presence, raised question as to our need for separatism and false sacrifice? Are we, like the men of the Gospel this morning, afraid of losing our identity because we are no longer in the world of objects but relationships?

If indeed God is at the front door knocking with and through these questions, and I believe this to be the case, then God looks to us and his body the Church to welcome him. And, it breaks our Lord's heart when we do not; when we do not forgive, when we do not show mercy, when we are not of peace, when we do not turn from our own prejudices and smallness of mind, when we seek to objectify and limit living love.

Christ, we need to remember, wants to embrace us and open our lives to complete in us what we cannot do for ourselves in a world in which there is just a bit too much superstition afoot. He's about love; a love which passes all understanding, blurs a lot of our sacred boundaries; a love about which we as Christians actually know very little. However, it is a love which makes the impossible possible; asking only that we be willing to receive it and to let God work in and through us with a power to make of this world and of us what and who it and we are not!

How ridiculous! How wonderful!