



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, July 8, 2012
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Choral Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.
on
Saint Mark 6:1-13
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FAMILIAR WITH JESUS?

It is put forth as a proverb: a prophet is honored everywhere, except among the people who knew him as a boy. But is it true? To the contrary, we might think, it is our joy to watch our children mature and succeed in life. Think of how we observe the choir boys grow taller and excel in their singing. They get praised all over the world, yes, but also here. We don't say, "Well, I've heard the folks in Dresden really liked your singing, but aren't you the snot-nosed brat who used to wear the same socks for a week?" Or take our youth: they go off on mission trips, they graduate and move away, and when they return, we're glad to see them, glad to learn what they've been doing. We rejoice when they excel; we don't dishonor them. It is, in fact, awesome to watch a young person transmorph into a mature adult. We, who knew them back when, do in fact honor them.

Yet if they come back with a strange word for us, now that's different. A strange word, a prophetic word, something spoken forth to us as a word of truth—we'll say, "Who are you to speak that way to us? Didn't we know you in diapers?"

They look at Jesus and they say to each other, where does this guy get all his talk? Don't we know his parents, his family? Didn't he grow up here? Why is everyone fussing about him?

It's as if you had given your whole life to the advancement of reproductive freedom, and this young adult comes back home and announces she is now a pro-life activist. (Or vice versa . . .) She wants to change your mind. And worse: she tells you she's praying for you.

Where did she get all that? I knew her back when . . .

Or it's as if you gave so much to the church, working on committees, helping with tours or the soup kitchen or the worship, and your son becomes a successful and good adult. But he won't go to church—not with you, not with anyone, not anywhere. He tells you you've been brainwashed, and he rejects all brainwashing. "All this God stuff," he says, "is a foolishness, and a hindrance to true human happiness. Throw off the shackles of religion," he tells you, "and quit being a hypocrite!"

Where did he get that? I knew him . . .

Back when my son was in high school, a Fordham professor asked me where he was going to go to college. I named the place, and he said, “Oh, they’re very Roman Catholic. What if he becomes one?” And I said, “Well, it would be better than becoming an atheist!” Yet when it happened (for he did become a Roman Catholic), I found on the gut-feeling level that it was very hard. For we are now separated at the altar.

Almost every grown-up knows the difficulty of hearing a strange word from a young adult that we knew way-back-when, a strange word that might be a prophetic word. And our reaction is to ask, “Where did she get all that?” “Who does he think he is?”

So it was in Jesus’ home town; after he preached repentance and did many healings and even drove away evil forces, he came back home. But unlike the returnees we might have heard from, Jesus comes home with a word that’s assuredly true. That’s the sadness of today’s Gospel. Jesus has preached repentance from sin and he has done wonderful, beautiful things. In fact, the last thing he has done was to raise a little girl, last week’s 12-year-old tender lamb of a child, back from death to life. Now he’s home, and he finds his power greatly diminished. Why? Because the home folks don’t believe in him. They can’t hear his words.

And it is perhaps at this point that each of us starts to get it. We didn’t know Jesus as a boy, of course; we didn’t know his family, he wasn’t reared in our town. But for many of us he is quite familiar. We’ve been to church before, maybe lots of times. We’re rather used to it. We have a Sunday ceremony, we hear the Gospel read, we receive the Sacrament, we go our way. And the question starts to slip into a crack of our consciousness: has Jesus become so familiar that we are like those folks in his home town? The Bible stories, for us, have turned into old stories. The things of the church feel like old things. Have I become someone who can no longer hear Jesus speak to me?

And more: maybe that’s why I don’t sense power in the Bible, the Word, the Bread, the Wine. I’ve allowed myself to become deaf to Jesus, and it’s no wonder my life lacks the strength he would give me. No hearing, no repentance, no healing, no enthusiasm.

Now I know that this is *not* the case for a good number of you. Many of you are new to Christianity, and the Gospel is fresh excitement, and every week the sacrament of the altar carries you away. To you I would say that what I’ve been describing is a danger that lies in your future. For I certainly hope and pray that you will come to the altar week by week for years, and become very familiar with all the stories of the Gospel. Most of all, I hope that you become familiar with Jesus. But what you want to look out for—what many of us may have already fallen into—is that point where familiarity slides into . . .

. . . into what? It’s not contempt. Perhaps we should call it “imperviousness,” the assuredness that we comprehend Jesus, that we know him the way we know something that’s fixed in the past. *But Jesus*, with whom we long to be familiar, *is always with us in the present*. He is the living Lord, who has risen from the dead and is indeed our Lord leading us into that kingdom where he reigns.

So the final question is, how can we be familiar with Jesus without becoming also deaf to him? Very briefly, that's why today's Gospel has those two parts. Right after Jesus was unable to do much in his home town, he sends out his disciples. He gives a lot of instructions, and they go out to teach and touch and heal—just like Jesus. The point is plain: if we hear Jesus truly, it never stops with us. It's like forgiveness in the Lord's prayer: when God forgives us it simply cannot stop there: if God forgives us, then we will be forgiving others. So today: if we hear Jesus we are also speaking about Jesus. If Jesus has touched us then we are touching others. The Gospel never stops with any individual. If it extends to you, then you extend it to others.

This is the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is the spirit of Jesus, in whose Name let us pray. *O Jesus, I want to hear you, I want to be close and familiar with you; please do with me that I may do for others. Amen.*