

Homecoming

Epistle: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Gospel: Mark 6:1-13

Proper 9

Believing always carries a risk. It takes courage to believe in good news when we see so much bad news in the world, or to believe a person who carries an “almost too good to believe” message, particularly when you already know a few things about the messenger. There are many barriers to believing. One such barrier may be fear, the fear that God won’t help you through whatever unknown encounter you may be facing. Another may be the feeling that what you would like to believe just doesn’t square with the way you see or encounter things.

In today’s gospel story we find another barrier to belief. This time it’s not so much fear of the unknown as fear of the already known, and the feeling that God can’t possibly be at work in the very familiar. You may have experienced this yourself, when a parent, or friend can’t believe that you are capable of something new, something unexpected. Or perhaps you have at times doubted that your child or someone that you know well is capable of something wonderful. I remember many years ago when one of my teenage children brought home a beautiful painting that he had done at school. It took him twenty minutes to persuade me that he had really created this amazing thing himself – Where did he get such talent? Not from me. You also may have worried about whether your child would be able to cope with the rigours of college or a new and challenging job.

When this happens, the lack of belief can become a barrier to the coming into being of that newness. This is what we see in today’s gospel. Jesus has been away from home for some time, beginning his mission of hope, love, and God’s power to change lives. He has been living this message wherever he goes, and he has been creating new life through preaching and healing, making it clear that God is not held back by brokenness. And he has demonstrated that God can be at work in unexpected ways, in unexpected places and in unexpected people.

Now Jesus comes home to Nazareth. The people there have heard about his work, his teaching, and his breaking through barriers, and they say to themselves, “Really? Oh come on. We know this guy. This is Jesus. I remember

him when he lived just down the street. He wasn't anything special – just a carpenter. He made tables and benches. We know all about him. We know his mother, brothers and sisters, as well as the questionable details about his birth.

So “they took offence at him”. The Greek actually says they were scandalised by him, or as some versions of scripture say, “he was a stumbling block for them”. But in truth it was their assumptions that were the stumbling block. And it seems that this assumption of theirs in turn became a stumbling block for the powers that Jesus had been demonstrating in other places. No granting of power meant that “he could do no deed of power there”.

I think we know this scenario. The assumption that we can't do the job because we don't have the right credentials, the right education or sufficient experience means that we won't get the job, and so whatever it is we have to offer does not come into being because it is not welcome in that place. So if our abilities are going to thrive and grow, they will have to find another home.

If you have ever had this experience of being put down by those who know you well, you are not alone. You are in the good company of Jesus. But take care. Just as you may have had your God given talents ignored or dismissed, rather like a seed that can't grow, we in turn can do this to others. We too can restrict what we think God is capable of not only in individual lives, but in the lives of whole communities.

There's another stumbling block that may hold back the work of God: you. You may believe that you know yourself so well that some new thing that is trying to spring up in you can't possibly be real - that you aren't capable of what God may be calling you to do. After all, you know yourself very well, and this just couldn't be meant to be. Or could it? What if whatever problems or failures we may be dealing with are God's invitations to a new way, a new hope?

Jesus is a failure in his home town. But he doesn't give up. Instead, he tries a new angle. He uses others, his newly appointed disciples to spread the message and share the power and love of God. Really? These disciples, who are still having trouble understanding who he is and what exactly he is up to? But Jesus does just what the people of Nazareth would not do. He refuses to write off these simple, often bumbling people. He believes in them. He entrusts the mission which might have come to a full stop at his failure in Nazareth to them.

But notice that in sending out his disciples, Jesus does not sent them out alone. He sends them in pairs, indicating that he doesn't expect anyone to to his work alone. We need each other. None of us have all the gifts necessary to bring the good news. What one lacks in compassion, the other might bring. What one lacks in imagination, the other might have. What another might lack in hard nosed common sense yet another might bring. None of us will have all the gifts necessary to bring the good news of the God's kingdom to the people of the world.

If you are afraid and unbelieving, remember that your own flaws, like the thorn in his side that Paul talks about are not a barrier to God. In fact a flaw may somehow be a vehicle for God's power. Challenged by the brilliant but shallow teaching of some "super-apostles", Paul insists that his only credentials are his weaknesses, for it is in these that God's grace is most powerfully at work. Your crack, may somehow let the light in for another who could not see it were it not for that chink in your armour.

The people of Nazareth knew the Messiah they were waiting for. He would be a political leader like David, who would unite the nation and re-establish the monarchy. It never occurred to them that God would come among them in someone so ordinary as the boy next door, the carpenter, Mary's son.

Then along comes Jesus, inviting his old neighbours and all of us to think anew, to follow him to new places, to do things we never did before, to care more and give more and love more and be more than we ever imagined possible.

Let us not let him get away from us again.

Amen

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