

[Mark 6:1-13](#)

Are you a glass half-full person or a glass half-empty person? I know plenty of people of both persuasions.

As some of you have heard me say before, I come from a family which has a history of depression, so you can imagine there can be quite a bit of half-empty in the Faulkners.

But I also have friends who are entrepreneurs and who can find opportunities even in a crisis. I think of one particular friend whose business collapsed when the first COVID-19 lockdown happened, but he saw new and different opportunities in the changed circumstances, and soon he had invented two brand new businesses plus a new expression of an old business.

Both incidents in our reading today contain the possibility or the reality of difficulty for the Gospel. Jesus doesn't get anywhere when he returns to his home town (verse 5), and he warns the disciples that they may have to shake the dust off their feet against those who refuse to listen to them (verse 11). In both cases the narrative teaches us important things about following Jesus' call to mission.

Firstly, let's consider *Jesus at Nazareth*.

⁵ He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few people who were ill and heal them.

Only a few people were healed, Jesus? Goodness me, we'd settle for that! It would be an improvement for us, unlike you!

So what's going on? We have the corrosive acids of cynicism and unbelief. Cynicism from a crowd who think they know all about Jesus when actually they don't. They think he's still the carpenter's son. They take offence – he can't be any better than us! (Verses 2-3)

Unbelief? Jesus was amazed at their lack of faith (verse 6), but it follows on from their cynicism. If they're refusing to believe Jesus is anything more than just local lad made good, they will not have the openness to have faith in him and thus receive the blessings he has for them. What a contrast from the many times Jesus says to some individuals, 'Your faith has made you well.'

If even Jesus can have this experience of running up against a spiritual brick wall in people then at least let that help us take heart when we are attempting

to share our faith and no-one wants to know. How we would love them to respond! We might even be desperate for a response! But it isn't in our hands.

Some of this is about recognising the rôle of free will and of accepting that we cannot force a response. We have to ask ourselves whether we have been truly faithful to the Gospel, because that's our task.

None of this should stop us praying for the Holy Spirit to be at work. If people are going to respond to Jesus then the Spirit needs to be at work in them before we even open our mouths. This is where John Wesley famously believed in what he called 'prevenient grace', where the word 'prevenient' is made up of 'pre' (i.e., going before something or someone) and 'venir', the French verb 'to come'. The Holy Spirit comes first. Before we even get into the nitty gritty of reaching out to people with the love of God in our words and our deeds we need to pray that the Spirit of God will go ahead of us.

So when we are in mission mode, our task is fidelity to the Gospel. We leave the response to the people's free will, but we pray that the Holy Spirit will get to them before us and prepare their hearts, otherwise no positive response to Jesus is possible.

But I think before we leave this first of the two episodes we need to reflect on the story in a different way. When I realised that as I said Jesus' hearers 'think they know all about Jesus when actually they don't' a nasty chill went up my spine.

Because I thought that could describe us.

We think we know all about Jesus, and like them we rarely if ever see him working any miracles among us. Could it be that we've deceived ourselves and we don't know Jesus as well as we think?

Sadly, I think that's possible. I listen to some Christians describe their understanding of Jesus and it's very limited, if not downright partial. They just take on the bits of Jesus that they like and they discard the rest in much the same way that we put leftovers from dinner in the food recycling bin.

So as well as encouraging us to be faithful in sharing the Gospel and leaving the results to God while praying for his Spirit to be at work, I also want to issue a challenge today. How many of us have become complacent about Jesus? How many of us have remained with little more than a Sunday School image of him? How many of us go on seriously engaging with Jesus as portrayed in the four

Gospels? How many of us are willing to let Jesus reshape our image of him instead of us persistently making him in our image?

It's imperative we let Jesus challenge us into appreciating a more fully orbed understanding of him, because we can't afford to proclaim a fantasy Jesus to the world. And praying to a fantasy Jesus will get us nowhere: we certainly won't see any miracles.

Secondly, let's consider *the disciples on mission*.

Humanly, it seems surprising that Jesus entrusts his mission to his disciples at this point. As one scholar says,

Heretofore they have impeded Jesus' mission (1:36-39), become exasperated with him (2:23-25), and even opposed him (3:21). Their perception of Jesus has been – and will continue to be – marked by misunderstanding (8:14-21).¹

Fancy Jesus choosing a motley crew like that and entrusting them with his mission! But that's exactly what he does. This bunch of incompetents is sent out by Jesus to the nearby villages with his message in word and deed.

The Christian church still does similarly crazy things at times, often with young people. My first ever trip abroad was to Norway with a project of the European Methodist Youth Council where young people got used to mission by becoming missionaries in a foreign land during the school holidays.

Later, I would be involved with a Youth For Christ centre where the team spearheading our outreach was drawn entirely from young people in their late teens and their twenties who were taking gap years to offer themselves to the church.

As you can imagine, many of these people (me included) were rough around the edges, but God used us.

What excuse, then, do those of us have who have served Christ for many decades?

And it's the real thing, too, not a trial run. The simplicity of their sending is similar to the simplicity with which the Israelites had to leave Egypt. This is therefore like a new Exodus. That makes it highly significant in a Jewish context. The clueless disciples get a central role in Jesus' kingdom mission.

But – just like Jesus – they may encounter difficulty:

¹¹ And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.'

That's quite a sign, to shake the dust off their feet against those who don't believe:

This is a searing indictment since Jews travelling outside Palestine were required to shake themselves free of dust when returning home lest they pollute the holy land.²

In other words, if people rejected the message, treat them like they are heathens, even if they are Jews living in the Holy Land!

Jesus prepares them for the worst, just as he has suffered rejection at Nazareth. Don't waste your time with such people, he says, move on to where it will be more fruitful.

Local Preachers and ministers might identify a little bit with the disciples here: we have all known congregations that have been resistant to our preaching of the word. I think there are serious questions about whether the denomination should pour resources into such churches.

In that sense, those we send out on mission should be able to know that they can move on from the places of resistance and opposition to those where the Holy Spirit is at work with the prevenient grace we talked about earlier. I once heard about an Anglican curate who had a terrible time in his first parish. On the day he moved out, he drove to the edge of the parish boundary, took off the socks he was wearing, and threw them down as a sign of shaking the dust off his feet against those who had mistreated him.

All that said, the disciples with their half-baked faith see amazing results.

So – let's by all means anticipate possible opposition or resistance to the Gospel, but let's leave things in the hands of the Holy Spirit to work miracles in people's hearts and minds, and let's also be willing to walk away from those who are hostile to our faith and go somewhere fruitful.

¹ James R Edwards, *The Gospel According To Mark*, p177f.

² Edwards, p181.