

Sermon given at the Second Festival Eucharist of 2012

by the Revd Dr Simon Tibbs

The Fourteenth Sunday of the year, 8 July 2012

I'm leaving South Africa a week from today, after a fascinating and transformative year.

People have been very kind to me, including Fr. Andrew and Mother Clare, and others here, and my occasional involvement with the life of this Cathedral has been part of the rich mix.

Thankyou.

Working as a Lecturer in Biblical Studies at CotT has been rich indeed. South Africans are good at including, and I have felt included. And opening the scriptures with a diverse group of committed people, and getting a sense of how it all looks to them, has been wonderful.

We started off our first year class this year by talking about hermeneutics – ways of interpreting the Bible. We spent quite a bit of time thinking about how we ask questions, and that our interpretation of a text is often only as good as the questions we ask. It's a good exercise, when you sit down with a new passage, to begin by jotting down questions.

Thinking through what we'd like to know can often help to unlock an unyielding passage.

Take the very short Gospel passage set down for today. Blink, and you've missed it.

Mark's Gospel is a bit like a film where someone has their finger permanently pressed on the forward button, so that it moves at double speed. The effect is mesmerizing, but it can be hard to catch the significance of what's going on. I've structured this sermon around my questions, five of them, as a way of slowing things down, hopefully with a view to seeing more, and

missing less – more of Jesus, that is. As it's a short text, we'll move through it verse-by-verse.

From there he went to his home town accompanied by his disciples. When the Sabbath came he began to teach in the synagogue.

Question One. What do we know or what can we guess about the Synagogue in Nazareth?

The frequent mentions of the synagogue in the Gospels are a bit of a puzzle. The synagogue as a developed institution is a product of the period after the year 70 of the Common Era, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the sacrifices offered in the Temple stopped. Judaism at that point shifted its centre of gravity from being a religion based on sacrifice to being a religion based on scripture. Rabbis and their priorities come to dominate, and the synagogue becomes a centre of authority. About synagogues in the time of Jesus, when the Temple and its sacrifices were still intact, not that much is known. But we do know two things. First, any adult male in good standing could be allowed to preach. Secondly, we know that synagogues exercised a range of social functions as well as religious ones. They were community centres as well as centres of worship, prayer and teaching. What we are dealing with in Mark 6 is probably as much a kind of village meeting as a Sunday service.

And the large congregation who heard him asked in amazement, 'Where does he get it from? What is this wisdom he has been given? How does he perform such miracles?'

Question Two. What did Jesus say in the Synagogue that day?

A parallel passage in St. Luke's Gospel has Jesus reading from Isaiah 61, 'the spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor'. The scripture somehow completes the scene. It does seem odd that Mark should tell us the effect of Jesus's teaching in the Synagogue at Nazareth, but nothing about its content. The film is moving at double speed.

Luke's quotation of the Isaiah passage gives us a wonderful vision of the kingdom – release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for those who are oppressed. He places the incident in Nazareth right at the beginning of Jesus's teaching ministry. It stands as a sort of manifesto for Jesus's career, encapsulating the whole movement of the Gospel story. Good news is proclaimed – good news that has social and political teeth – is rejected – and, finally, is vindicated.

Mark doesn't seem to attach as much importance to the scene as Luke does. He puts it, not at the start of the story, as a sort of overture that introduces the main themes, but in the middle, sandwiched between a whole load of other short scenes. I wonder if he has not included anything about the preaching of Jesus because it was too context-specific. I don't think Jesus was one for delivering a general message that could be delivered in resounding phrases, at any time, and in any place. I think he was always speaking to *those* people. Look at the parables, which are so rich in concrete detail about rural life, and the land, and work. And these were people he knew well. I bet he would have focused a lot on 'local issues'.

When he is speaking one to one with people in the Gospels, Jesus has an uncanny sense of where they are and what they need to hear. In our own relationship with Christ, we find if we are patient that he has things to say about our experience of trauma and death, about depression, and work and school. But he speaks to communities too. Imagine him here with us this morning. Perhaps he has also something to say about whether the Festival is a good thing, or elitist and a pain in the neck. About corruption and the state of the roads. About whether to keep on with cultural traditions that harm people. About the Wars of Dispossession and Apartheid, and the vast gulf that still separates township from town in terms of wealth, services and aspirations. About what to call this place, eRhini or whatever.

Well, whatever it was he said, they didn't like it. Often, we don't either.

Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not his sisters here with us?

Question Three. What was Jesus's job?

The Greek word used to describe Jesus's profession, *tektōn*, implies a skilled person working with his hands, a worker in wood, or metal, or stone. The point is that it suggests someone skilled. In Jesus's case, maybe he had been running the family business by this point (we can assume that Joseph has died by this point). Here's the shock then: to use class terminology – and you know how we Brits like to use class terminology – Jesus is lower middle class. He is not part of the elite, but he has skills and some education, and his family is not on the bread-line. He is the kind of person who would have some mobility within that complex society, and he would need it. Much of the business for a skilled artisan, after all, would be connected

to the wealth-generating Roman presence. Our sentimental image of Jesus as a barefoot Galilean peasant may be a bit off. More importantly, the description of Jesus as a *tektōn* shows that his poverty is voluntary. He *chooses* downward mobility for the sake of his Gospel and those who will hear it and refuse to hear it, both poor and rich.

About this verse, it's also worth noting the typical sexism of the culture in the way the family is described, mother, brothers named one by one, sisters not enumerated, not named. This reflects cultural priorities; let's not assume they are also Jesus's. His sisters must have been individuals to Jesus, not an undifferentiated collective.

So they turned against him. Jesus said to them, 'A prophet never lacks honour except in his home town, among his relations and his own family'.

Question Four. What do we mean when we talk about Jesus as a prophet?

Our reading from Ezekiel gives us a model for all Biblical prophecy. 'You shall say to them, "thus says the Lord"'. They may hear or not hear. They probably won't'. To be a prophet is to be lonely. You have to say it, in season, out of season. Just say it. Nowhere is the loneliness of the prophet clearer than when speaking within the intimacy of his or her own community or family circle. As St. John says of Jesus, 'he came to his own, and his own people would not accept him'. Familiarity breeds contempt, and other stories in the Gospels show that Jesus knew what it was like to be part of a contemptuous family.

The Gospel writers are constantly inviting us to test our response to Jesus. As we read, we see as in a strange, magical mirror the range of different responses we also note within ourselves

– hostility, fear, prejudice, doubt; longing, faith. Again and again, the Gospels invite us to choose. Or rather *he* invites us. Dare we chose Christ? It's the moment, endlessly repeated, that is crystallised in Psalm 95, appointed in Anglican tradition to be read daily, 'today if you will hear his voice, harden not your hearts'.

And he was unable to do any miracle there, except that he put his hands on a few sick people and healed them; and he was amazed at their want of faith.

Question Five. Why could Jesus do no deed of power?

This incident ends the little scene in Nazareth on a note of irony. We are frequently told in Mark's Gospel how Jesus's miracles caused amazement to the people who witnessed them. Here it is Jesus who is amazed.

But the main message of the verse, and of the whole passage, concerns the issue of faith.

The other Gospel writers miss out the bit about Jesus being unable to do any miracles, but I think Mark is spot on. It's within the relationship of faith, of faithfulness, that we discover God in Christ, and we discover him by his action in our lives and the lives of our communities. They start to change. And anything other than that change is the answer to a different question.

So, yes, we question the scriptures, just as we question God. But we question on the basis of the knowledge of God we already have, hoping for more. Faith precedes understanding. We know by knowing, if you like. And we know because we hope to change.

If you seek faith, prepare to change, that is the message of today's Gospel. But, as they say, if you don't want to hear the answer, don't ask the question.