



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The Fifth Sunday after Trinity

### Proper 9 Year B

2 Corinthians 12. 2-10

Mark 6. 1-13

Both these readings are about faith. If we start with the gospel reading it is composed of two stories as was last week's. Last week we read about Jairus, a leader in the synagogue in Capernaum and the restoration of his daughter's life. Within that account is the healing of the woman who had suffered from haemorrhages all her life. These stories show faith. In the case of the unnamed woman, a faith so strong that she knows if she only touches the hem of Jesus' robe she will be healed. Jesus' words to her after the cure seem to complete the process, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.'

Our gospel reading for this week follows on from these episodes. <sup>6.1</sup>'He left that place and came to his home town, and his disciples followed him.' Jesus has been healing in the district around the lake and at Capernaum which stands on the northern shore. Now he returns to his home district of Nazareth. Nazareth is to the south west of the lake not very far from it.

We have seen the episode when Jesus was teaching and his mother and brothers came to get him. They obviously thought he was mad or at the very least were embarrassed about his behaviour. Jesus' response when told they were outside was to point to the people who were inside sitting and listening to him and to say, 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.' Luke 8.21 Jesus has made it quite clear that with the coming of the kingdom of God all those who believe are members of the family of Christ. We can call God, Abba, father; we are inheritors and co heirs with Christ.

So now he returns to his own home area. The people know him. They have seen him grow up. They know his family. Jesus is a member of the family business, he is a carpenter.

If you think back to John 1. 45-46 <sup>45</sup> 'Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth."

<sup>46</sup>Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

Nazareth hadn't got a particularly good reputation as we can see from Nathanael's scathing remark. A small place about the size of two football pitches; everyone would know everyone else's business. It was the Sabbath and Jesus was in the synagogue preaching and teaching. From this reading we learn of his family, 'Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' Jesus has a large family and James is the oldest of his siblings. It is quite obvious that they don't know what to make of him and the reaction of the town's folk would be mirrored by his family. (Later his family would believe and James would lead the Jerusalem church.)

We have seen the wonderful works Jesus has performed; we have heard his teaching and seen the effect he has on people. Phillip is quite clear, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote,' The crowds around the district who followed Jesus were vast. Many believed and the powers that be were beginning to see him as a threat and yet juxtaposed to this is the reception of Jesus in his own home town.

One would have thought they would be proud of him, been amazed at his healings in the name and the power of God. But no- instead we have

'They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! 'Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offence at him.'

Because they know him it is not acceptable for him to teach as he did. Remember this is not a run of the mill talk Jesus gives, the sort they would have been used to. They were expecting the traditional expounding of the scriptures. Suddenly Jesus is talking of the kingdom of God which has come here and now. Luke's account, 4. 16+ is a full one and it gives us more detail.

'When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." ' And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town.'

The key note here is Jesus' words 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' Jesus is telling them that he is the one of whom Isaiah spoke. That wherever he is there is the kingdom of God; that he is the anointed one, the Messiah and he has come to establish a kingdom that will turn the world's values on its head and establish the rule of God. Then, 'justice will roll down like the

waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream,' Amos 5. 24. The world will be governed by the kingdom values, the captives will be freed and the blind will see. All will be revealed to humanity. If we think of Mary's song the Magnificat we have a clear picture of the kingdom values. So then here is Jesus, the carpenter basically saying. You have waited for the promised messiah – I am he. In Luke the peoples' response is gracious in Mark it is not, 'they took offence at him.' Who does he think he is making such outrageous claims? He's only the local woodworker- what a cheek.

<sup>4</sup>Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.' <sup>5</sup>And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. <sup>6</sup>And he was amazed at their unbelief.'

True enough. People are all very willing to accept a stranger in a place of authority but not the local lad. I guess it's where the saying 'familiarity breeds contempt' comes from. They certainly had contempt for Jesus. The corollary of that is they had no faith. We see in Luke's version that the town's folk had heard about what he had done in Capernaum and the surrounding district and Jesus expects they will want a similar demonstration.

"Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." ' And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town.'

Jesus is not there to perform at people's demand; he is there to bring the word of God. He is there to bring in the kingdom.

In Mark we see the effect of their lack of faith. Jesus simply could 'do no deed of power there, except to cure a few people.' It is an interesting detail. Jesus does not simply offer the word and promises of God; we are expected to respond; to repent and to turn to Christ. We believe in his word and then we live it out in our lives. It is a two way process.

Mark puts the accounts of the healings at Capernaum next to this account of Jesus in Nazareth for a reason. We have examples of faith and lack of it. The woman at Capernaum believes and Jesus' words complete the cure. So often cures mention the faith of the one who is cured or who begs for a cure for another. Think of the Canaanite woman, 'Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.' Matthew 15.28 Lack of faith means that Jesus cannot cure as he has done; Jesus requires a response in faith.

This story is put next to the sending out of the twelve. It appears in all three of the synoptic gospels. Luke and Mark's accounts are almost identical. Matthew gives us more detail.

Jesus is about to send the disciples out on mission, he wants them to be under no illusion as to the dangers they may face. "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves;' Matthew 9.16

I think we also have to keep in mind when the gospel was written, probably somewhere around AD 70 but certainly around the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Persecution of Christians by the Romans raged after AD 64 and on until it ceased under Constantine in 313. It was always a dangerous thing to follow Jesus; he was put to death by his own people. This passage would have been written with the early Christians in mind too. Mark would have expected them to read this in the light of their own lives. The truth being, life is tough; you will be persecuted if you follow Jesus' way. A clear link to what Paul says.

Jesus sends the twelve out on their first mission but he doesn't send them together he sends them in twos. They have a companion but they are still vulnerable but, and it is a big but, they are not acting in their own strength but in the strength of God and his Holy Spirit.

The experience at Nazareth will have shown the disciples what opposition they may face. They have seen the religious leaders threaten Jesus, they are taking a risk. Faith in Jesus and doing his work, standing up for what is right is a risk but he asks no less of his followers then and now. Jesus gives the disciples authority over unclean spirits. They go in God's name with the power of Jesus, this of course prefigures Pentecost.

<sup>8</sup>'He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; <sup>9</sup>but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. <sup>10</sup>He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. <sup>11</sup> If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.' It is not often we get such a set of clear instructions from Jesus but he is clear here. Firstly take nothing – why is that? Time is of the essence, things hold you back, and they are distractions. Singleness of purpose must be their aim. Also they will be dependent on people's good will. If a person is willing to help they will be more likely to respond to the message than people who are antagonistic. There is one way to deal with them just now, <sup>11</sup>'If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.'

Stay in one place, don't dot about, teach from there and move on. Don't spend time arguing with difficult people, deal with those who are receptive to the gospel. Heal in my name. I think the key is immediacy. Jesus has not got long and so he sends them out on their first mission.

<sup>12</sup>'So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. <sup>13</sup>They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.'

That first mission is a resounding success. They go out in faith with authority and the powers of darkness and illness are vanquished in the name of Jesus of Nazareth. It does prefigure the disciples going out on mission after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Our epistle passage at a first reading is difficult. One reason for this as I have said before is that it is taken out of context. Last week's epistle reading was from 2 Corinthians 8 now we have moved to 2 Corinthians 12 – it's a big gap!

Last week Paul was appealing to the Corinthian church not to falter in their promised project to donate funds for their impoverished brothers and sisters in Christ in Jerusalem. They had started well enough but had gone off the boil. Paul carries on in this vein for a while then he speaks of another problem which is to say the least a distraction and a dangerous one if it leads them from Paul's testimony and thereby the truth.

Corinth was an important Greek city, brutally captured and demolished by the Romans; it was rebuilt by them and made a major city in Greece. Its population was made up mainly of Romans, Greeks and Jews. The Corinthians liked to think of their town as Roman and adopted Roman ways. Their culture was highly developed; there were myriad Gods to say nothing of Emperor Worship. They would have been used to debate and the rhetoric of speech making and fine argument. This in itself was an art form. It was to this city Paul had taken the gospel now he is addressing them once more.

Paul does not pretend he is gifted in the ways of subtle or showy address or the skills of public speaking (though he can be when he wishes!) but there are those who are and in contrast to him used these techniques to press home their advantage.

The Corinthian Christians are being led astray by false teachers. It is reminiscent of those words in in 2 Timothy 4

<sup>3</sup>'For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, <sup>4</sup> and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.'

What has been happening is pretty subtle: these 'teachers' would be teaching of Jesus, their version; the gospel, their version; theology, their version. They were subverting the teaching of Paul and his fellows. One technique they used was clever rhetoric, another was boasting. Boasting about the wonderful spiritual experiences they had had, unlike lesser mortals.

There is no need for Paul to boast he is simply living the Christ life and witnessing to his crucified and risen Lord and God; the Lord who brings salvation and new life to all who truly turn to him. Actually think of the words of the hymn, 'forbid it Lord that I should boast save in the cross of Christ my God.' and you have it in one.

Paul says in the passage prior to this that he can boast and cleverly turns boasting on its head. People boast about great successes and achievements. Those are the things that carry weight in this world. But Paul is not interested in the world's values but the kingdom values. In chapter 11 he boasts about the number of times he has been punished, captured or suffered from hardships for Christ's sake. We would see these as virtues but it's not much of a CV in the classical world. But Paul in a way is teasing them. Their values are all wrong, <sup>30</sup>'If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.'

Link that to the end of our reading when Paul explains what he means,

<sup>10</sup>'Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.'

That is the Christian paradox. Christ the co-creator - emptied himself, became vulnerable, and was obedient unto death on a Cross for humanity.

If we think of those false teachers who boast of their wonderful spiritual experiences to win people over, Paul can match it should he wish to!

<sup>12</sup>'It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.'

Paul goes on to relate a spiritual experience and doesn't reveal till verse 7 that he is referring to himself that is obvious from the reference to his elation; elation given by the wonderful spiritual experiences he has been gifted in his relationship with Christ.

<sup>6</sup>'But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, <sup>7</sup>even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh.'

This is Paul's reference to the famous, 'thorn in the flesh' that has become a saying in society. What this 'thorn' was we will never know. Speculation has been endless, was it an illness? Was it his sufferings? It remains a mystery. But one thing needs underlining at once. These false teachers would never admit to weakness, they would never admit to thorns that habitually wounded them! Paul is turning the ploys of the false teachers upside down to prove himself by the one thing that can, truth.

He speaks for Jesus, he is Christ's ambassador. He is doing the job Christ gave him and he will do it through thick and thin to the end.

Another interesting point is that Paul prays to God about his 'thorn', well we would expect that, however,

<sup>8</sup>'Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, <sup>9</sup>but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'

Paul hears the word of God but God will not grant his request why, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'

'My grace is sufficient for you' are the wonderful words of God to us all.

So then Paul is content, anyone who follows Jesus must understand that things are turned upside down.

'So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

<sup>10</sup>Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.'

Paul is simply following in the way of Jesus and that was a stony road and still can be. 'Whoever would be my follower must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.'

Jesus insists on honesty and sincerity of heart. His was a love so strong it took him to Calvary. Paul's love for Jesus was so strong that it shines from the pages of the New Testament. Love is the key note of Christ's message.

This is from a book of blessings which someone gave me for Christmas last year.

*May God be with you today and always to surround you on all sides with his love. Amen* Anon.

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