

Sermon Pentecost 6 8th July 2012 John Dunnill

Ezekiel 2: 1-8; 3: 1-3, 14-15; Ps 123; 2 Corinthians 12: 2-10; Mark 6: 1-13

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Who then is this? The readings keep throwing this question at us. Who then is this, that even winds and sea obey him? Who is this, that he can bring a child back from the dead? And today the question takes a different turn: who is this? Who does he think he is?

I guess we've all had the experience of not being recognised by our nearest and dearest. It can give us a shock: if the people who have given me my identity don't recognise me, am I who I think I am?

When I was young I grew a beard, and a very handsome beard it was. Well, I was a student and it was 1969. They were stirring times: in Paris they were ripping up cobble stones, in the USA there were sit-ins in the universities, in London there were riots in Grosvenor Square. A bit of facial hair seemed the least one could do…. So when I came home for the Christmas holidays and stepped off the train, my father who had come to meet me was gazing up and down the platform looking for me and, I was standing in front of him….

Many of us enjoy the work of Richard Rohr the American Franciscan. He talks about his father, who was a simple German farmer who emigrated to the USA. He was constantly amazed at his son, and his ability to talk for an hour without notes to packed conference halls, and about spirituality! Richard says his father loved to come and hear him, though he could guarantee that within three minutes he would look down and his father would be asleep in the front row. Well, that's parents!

So Jesus came to his hometown and what happened? The story is strange: it starts so well and suddenly it all goes wrong. It's clear that at first they see the things of God in him. They speak of gifts 'given to him' (surely from above); they speak of 'wisdom' and 'power', echoing the language of Isaiah 11 which tells of the 'shoot from the stump of Jesse' on whom the spirit of the Lord will rest, 'the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might'. They are lost in wonder: extraordinary! isn't this Mary's son the carpenter and he can do all this!

But then there's a double-take. 'Isn't this Mary's son the carpenter?' can be said two ways, in wonder or in disgust. And calling him 'Son of Mary', like a man who doesn't have a proper father (now why was that?), and listing his brothers and

his sisters, suddenly cuts him down to size. Who does he think he is? Does he think he's somehow better than us?

So they 'took offence' at him, literally they 'stumbled' over him, this little community being a microcosm of his people, the Jewish nation. As St Paul says (using the same image), Christ was 'a stumbling block to Jews' and foolishness to gentiles [1 Cor 1:23]. So one minute they are marvelling at his powers and the next minute 'he could do no deed of power there'.

But what went wrong? We are told he taught, but we don't know what he said. Isn't it more that *he* said it, he who they had always known, and that challenged them to the root. If God could act and speak in him, God can act and speak in … no, let's not go there. Keep God at a distance, safe in a book. We don't want any of these long-haired prophets around the place.

The people of Nazareth of course are our representatives, ordinary folk who want to live quiet lives and don't want them upset by God. Of course let's talk about God, go to Synagogue on the Sabbath, tick the Anglican box on census day, but do we want God in our lives? Do we want to face that reality about who we are?

TS Eliot said 'Human kind cannot bear very much reality', and he put the words, in a play, on the lips of Archbishop Thomas Becket, only days before he was murdered, at the king's orders, for challenging people in the name of God.

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But challenging people in the name of God is the prophet's task. We heard that in the reading from Ezekiel, who, like Jeremiah, was called to witness to Israel in the difficult days of the exile in Babylon. His prophecy begins with an extraordinary vision of God in the form of four living creatures flying in the heavens with their 'wings' and their 'wheels' and a 'burning light', and he knows this is not God, only a pointer to God, 'the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God', and he falls on his face.

Then he hears a voice: 'O mortal', or better, 'Son of Adam, stand on your feet and I will speak with you'. And he stands up, terrified, and is given a commission, to go to the exiles where they are settled by the River Chebar, a great canal by the Euphrates River, and say '*Thus says the Lord God*'.

What message from God is he to give them? We don't know. Words of lamentation and judgement, we're told. As his prophecy unfolds there will be words of promise, but first there must be judgement. 'They are a rebellious house' he's told again and again, and their rebelliousness, their determination to do things their way, has caused the nation's defeat and landed them in exile.

To say that, to the leaders of his people, is not a task he wants. They will not want to hear it! Isn't it easier to blame God, blame the Babylonians, blame the weather? When he gets to the exiles in turmoil of spirit he sits among them stunned for seven days. And then he speaks.

It is the prophet's job to speak what must be spoken, like it or not. In same way St Paul, or his disciple, urged his protégé Timothy, 'Let no one despise your youth but set the believers an example in speech and conduct' [1 Tim 4: 12], and again, 'Proclaim the message; be persistent in season and out of season' [2 Tim 4: 2], and whether they want to hear your words or not.

It is the church's business to be counter-cultural, to speak God's word. Isn't that why Jesus, after the debacle at Nazareth, didn't pine or mutter, he called the twelve and gave them authority and power as apostles, sent-ones, with no frills but a clear purpose to proclaim the kingdom and cast out the powers of evil. And he told them: there will be places where you are accepted, and places where you are rejected: this *will* happen, don't be surprised.

And if they are rejected it is not necessarily because they are speaking words of judgement. I think we sometimes fool ourselves about this: we say, people don't want to hear about judgement, they want to hear about the love of God. Perhaps: no one likes to be told they are wrong. But Jesus didn't speak about judgement in the synagogue at Nazareth: it was the grace of God that he imparted that offended them

No, no one likes to be told they are wrong, and there is a danger for us in telling them that (or who do we think we are?). But they don't want to be told about the love of God either, because a loving God can't bear us to stay as we are, with all our idiocies and our half-heartedness. A loving God is yearning for us to grow into something great, and most people don't want to hear that either.

That's why St Paul, when he talks about his ministry as an apostle, talks about his failures.

Yes there are visions of the wonder of God, and St Paul was famous for his vision of Christ on the road to Damascus, and other visions recorded in the book of Acts [16: 9; 18: 9-10; 22: 17-21; 27: 23-4]. In 2 Corinthians 12 he says he's had visions as great as the prophet Ezekiel! – caught up into the third heaven, into Paradise the garden of God, and he's heard words too wonderful to utter. But he's careful to distance himself from all this: it wasn't really him, Paul, the one who grew up once at Tarsus, little Saul with his brothers and sisters. The vision wasn't for him, in himself, it was for him as 'a person in Christ'.

So yes he will boast about it, but only about what Christ is doing in and through him. And only after he's told them what being an apostle means to him, in an extraordinary list which fills half the previous chapter: imprisonments, floggings, stonings, shipwrecks, and – saving the best till last – how once he had to be smuggled out of Damascus by being let down through a hole in the city wall in a basket, like a load of merchandise or rubbish.

Not much glory there! And if he is tempted to feel proud about his role, there's that 'thorn in the flesh' sent by Satan, or is it God?, to keep him humble. We don't know what it was, and there is much speculation: was it attacks of blindness, perhaps, or malaria, or epilepsy, or a stammer (a problem for a speaker), or what?

Whatever it was, it was to keep him open to hear God's word: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'. As we sang just now: 'Only by grace … .' If we get our ego in the way, what we do will not work and it will not be of God. But God can work in our weakness, if we let him.

What about us? I don't know that any of us have an individual call to be a prophet or apostle, though many of us have calls to serve God in different ways. But we do have a collective call to be a prophetic institution in our place, and to speak God's word in words and in actions. Do we do that?

I guess we all have a hope that God will bless us through our strengths, and God has. But sometimes God blesses us also by reminding us of our weakness. It's our weakness we're conscious of today, with the loss of our dear friend Alan who has been part of this parish for long, and a core part of our little experiment in community living. Where does that leave us?

Can we in our weakness, like Jesus, convey the love of God in a way which brings people true and deep comfort, when they need to be comforted? AND can we in our weakness convey the love of God in a way brings to them a challenge, when they need to be challenged to grow into the bigness of God's vision for their lives?

'*Who then is this?*' They asked that about Jesus: do they ask that about us?

How do we feel if people don't recognise the love of God working through us? How do we feel if they do?