

Sunday July 4th 2021 at 9.30am - Trinity 5
Sermon on Mark 6:1-13
By Pat Hemsley, Lay Reader

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.

A dear friend we visited recently, whose wife died some time ago, proudly showed us a memorial book he has created of photos recording all the things she did. They had had a long marriage, but even knowing her as well as he did, he said, "I'd forgotten all the things she achieved, all the things she was involved with. However did she find time to care for me, the children and the house as she did?"

It was almost like sharing a eulogy, those tributes that are often the most humbling and moving things about funerals, where we listen to what the deceased person has achieved during his or her life. Often, especially in the case of someone who has long been seen as frail and aging, amazing exploits and talents have been revealed, things which have never even been spoken of to the family and have only been revealed after death. Instant judgements based on outward appearance or personal experience, are easily made and as easily mistaken. The tiny lady huddled in the corner of a care-home lounge, lost in a confused world of dementia, could once have been among the sharpest brains working as a decoder at Bletchley Park.

This poses the question then of how well we really know those we think we know, those with whom we share our lives and our love? In our gospel reading this morning the same question is being asked by Jesus' own family and by those amongst whom he had lived for thirty years. This was Mary's son, their carpenter, he'd played with them, worked with them, shared their celebrations, worshipped with them, they had known him man and boy, for heaven's sake! Yet now Jesus was travelling the countryside, healing the sick, performing miracles, gathering increasing crowds of followers. This day he'd preached to them in the very synagogue where he'd learned the Torah. What did he think he was doing? Who did he think he was?

The reaction was mixed. For some, Jesus' message of God's love and hope was manifest in his changed way of life and the wisdom of his words struck a chord. These marvelled at the tales of his miracles and were excited by his words. Many more were offended, scandalised by what Jesus was saying. The original Greek word used for "offended" is "scandalum", meaning "a stumbling block". Jesus' perceived effrontery in preaching, together with jealousy and resentment perhaps, and even fear created by the radical meaning behind his words, caused them to reject Jesus. Whilst for a few his words were a stepping stone on a faith journey, for the majority they were a stumbling block. Consequently Jesus "could do no good deed of power there."

Remember the saying “familiarity brings contempt”? The villagers of Nazareth thought they knew Jesus well and so did his family. Yet when what they thought they knew turned out to be different, they closed hearts and minds and treated him with contempt. Even his family, even Mary who had known since his conception who Jesus really was, found it difficult to accept this “new” Jesus once he ceased to be the carpenter they knew and became the messenger who puzzled and embarrassed them. Lack of faith in him meant that in Nazareth, he could work no miracles. A lack of faith had become a stumbling block for Jesus and had, in a manner of speaking, “tied God’s hands”.

Jesus was not deterred or put down by his rejection at Nazareth. Instead, he moved on, set on doing God’s will. He continued to encourage and move his disciples on, even though they too frequently misunderstood what he was doing. Peter blundered and denied him, Thomas doubted him, Judas betrayed him and yet Jesus knew them better than they knew themselves. He never considered them as stumbling blocks, but nurtured and affirmed them and sent them out, thus allowing God to work through him and through them.

In Nazareth, among people who knew him well, Jesus was “amazed at their disbelief”. I wonder if sometimes we amaze him with our disbelief - not in the sense that we have rejected Christianity, or that we disbelieve the words we say which affirm our faith. But perhaps our familiarity with Jesus blinds us to the unknown and unexpected in him, deafens us to the startling new meaning in his words. Maybe we fail to recognise his presence in the ordinary encounters of our daily lives or turn away from his calls to use our gifts in his service. Are we so familiar with what we think we know that we react to any new insight with, if not contempt, then indifference, or incredulity?

Our relationship with Jesus is never completed and we ask for grace to know him better. Our faith journey, too, is a continuing one. If we close our hearts and minds, we risk tying God’s hands as he reaches into our lives. Any poor spirit of cynicism or doubt becomes a stumbling block to recognise how God is at work wherever we are.

What of our response to those we think we know well - or even those we don’t? How often have we become, even unknowingly, stumbling blocks for others? There are depths in each of us, even those beloved people we spend our lives with, that only God knows. However, familiarity tends to mean that we give people a fixed role and we carry delineated expectations for them as a consequence. When they step outside of the role, as Jesus did, when they answer a vocational calling or dare to follow a dream, it’s very easy for our response to be a put-down, or a judgement--- a “who does she think she is?” kind of reaction. This may come from all kinds of sources ranging from jealousy, through ignorance and misunderstanding to fear; after all, it is hard to let go of those we love. But it speaks of begrudging and a small heart, and above all, it’s an attitude which may tie God’s hand as he seeks to work in the lives of others.

Returning to our friend with the memorial book of photos, I understood that there had been no such stumbling block in his relationship with his wife. His love and understanding had enabled and affirmed her in all she set out to do in life, and though he had forgotten how much she did, it was very obvious that God had worked through her all of her life as she shared her faith and joy and her bounteous supply of love. In fact, in all the eulogies I've listened to the most lasting legacy from any life would seem to be the giving and sharing of love.

That, of course, is what Jesus' mission on earth was; the sharing of the message of God's love, his forgiveness and hope. Some who heard it could not believe and thought it had no benefit for them. Many still feel the same way. He wants to continue his work through us as he sends us out into the world. He needs us to enable and to affirm others to achieve his plan for them. May we never be a stumbling block in their path, nor a stumbling block in God's plan for us. May we never tie his hands.
Amen