

# Hometown Blues

## Mark 6:1-6

At the end of my first year of parish ministry, I was invited to preach at the centenary of a little church in country South Australia, at a place most of you would have never heard of, Milendella. My great-great grandfather had been one of the founding members of that congregation. He was one who helped build the church over summer of 1892 and leading into 1893.



My grandparents owned a farm in the district, although it was share farmed by a family



friend because they had moved to live in Adelaide in the 1950's. I used to spend most school holidays there, helping my grandfather mend fences, chop wood and grub out weeds. But in a strange way, preaching at the centenary of Zion Lutheran Church was a kind of homecoming, even though I had never lived there. These sturdy, no nonsense people, their heritage of hard work and resoluteness in dealing with the marginal farming country in which they lived, was something I valued. Not to mention their commitment to God and their small church. I owe a great debt to these sturdy, faithful people of God.

It was a great honour to be part of the day in which people we are able to reflect on what God had done through the presence of this little church. I was warmly welcomed by the gathered community, many of whom I didn't know. Some remembered me as a child, and even remembered me telling them that I wanted to be a pastor. I went away from that day thanking God for the faith of my forbears. I wonder if I will get an invitation to the 125th anniversary in 2018.



Mine was a fond homecoming. By contrast, what happened to Jesus today wasn't. Jesus returns to the town he grew up in. He was the epitome of a local boy made good. We would expect the red carpet to be rolled out. But there are signs right from the start that the reception will be rocky.

It's the Sabbath. Jesus is given the privilege of sharing from God's word. We know from Luke's account that Jesus read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." The congregation wonder what he

will make of this passage of great hope. They get both less and more than they bargain for. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Jesus provokes amazement. Incredulity. Questions fly thick and fast:

“Where did this man get these things? What is this wisdom that has been given him?” People can’t make sense of the profound wisdom that they’ve heard, from the mouth of someone they knew as a child.

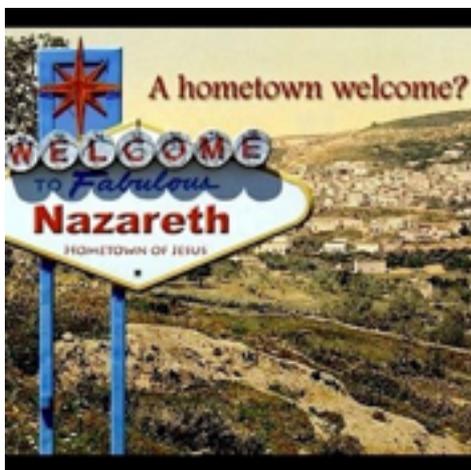
“What deeds of power are being done by his hands?” Isn’t this the one about whom it is said that he stilled a storm, exorcised a demon possessed man, healed a woman and raised a little girl from the dead?

“Isn’t this the carpenter?” Didn’t his hands used to saw wood and construct buildings around town? He is one of us, less than most of us actually, only a tradesman.

“Is this not the son of Mary?” We know his mother, but where’s his father. This simple question has the sting of the scandal of Jesus’ birth about it.

“Isn’t he the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” He’s just an ordinary bloke. Who is he, coming back to try and teach us something?

“And they took offence at him.” They were scandalised by Jesus himself, by his words and his actions, his claims, his preaching, his teaching. It simply wasn’t possible that the boy who grew up with them was a man of God. Some kind of homecoming this was.



Now it’s Jesus’ turn to be sadly amazed “at their lack of faith,” or more strictly, their unbelief. Other people, most of them foreigners, have been amazed at what they’ve heard and seen from Jesus. Their lives have been changed, their sins have been forgiven, their sickness has been healed. But Jesus strikes something different here. “Only in their own towns, among their relatives and in their own homes are prophets without honour.” That was certainly the experience of the prophets God called to announce his judgement on their disobedience. No one wanted to hear the call to repent and return to God.

Jesus now walks the very same path. God’s covenant people still don’t want to hear Jesus’ message. They don’t want to acknowledge their sin, and therefore be in a position to hear the good news that follows on from repentance. In doing so, they dishonour Jesus. To honour something means to “put a price or a value” on it. And this is the consequence of their actions. “Jesus could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them.” They didn’t expect anything of Jesus. They didn’t want anything from him. In a strange way, their attitude dis-ables Jesus. If you expect nothing, you receive nothing.

This incident leaves a sour taste in my mouth, and it makes me feel uncomfortable, and perhaps you also. Among all the gospels, Mark has the habit of getting under the skin of people who think they are the insiders, that they get Jesus and that they’re right on board with him. They soon find

that they aren't listening and they're not following. Just like the disciples themselves, again and again, even Jesus' own family, the residents of his hometown, and certainly the Pharisees.

Would it stretching this incident too far to say that the church, this congregation, is Jesus' hometown? Don't we believe that Jesus is present among us, his people, in each sister and brother who have been made members of his body through baptism? Haven't we heard him speak to us today through his word? Don't we confess that Jesus hosts us at his meal, and feeds us with his body and blood through bread and wine?

But what is our response to Jesus, who makes him home among us this day? What questions do we have for him? Are they the same questions as the hometown crowd?

"What is this wisdom that has been given him?" What are to make of Jesus' teaching, which in so many ways run counter to what our society teaches about the good life, about success, relationships, justice and compassion? Can we dare to follow Jesus, or are we simply going to follow the path of least resistance to our society?

"What deeds of power are being done by his hands?" Do we expect Jesus to do very much today, in our world, and in our personal circumstances? Do we dare to pray for Jesus' healing to flow through our lives, and do we pray that Jesus would heal others, including the greatest healing of all, the gift of faith that brings people back to life spiritually?

"Isn't this the carpenter...the son of Mary?" Do we want something, someone, more spectacular than this God in the flesh? Do we want a spiritual superhero who sweeps into our lives and saves us from difficult situations, rather than the God who had pitched his tent with us, and who will never abandon in the storms of our lives?

"And they took offence at him." What about us? Are we hanging on Jesus' words, or are we weighing them up, to see whether they fit our philosophy of life and align with our values? Are we offended by the uncompromising way that Jesus acts and teaches the love of his heavenly Father:

- in healing the sick, like the woman with uncontrollable bleeding
- in speaking to the outcasts in his society, like the Samaritan woman at the well;
- in confronting the greedy, like Zacchaeus
- in calling to account those who use their position and authority to spiritually and materially harm others, like the Pharisees, or Pilate;
- in feeding those who are hungry and have nowhere else to go, like the five thousand.

The greatest offence of all is the cross of Jesus. As Paul says of the church's core message: "We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks." Jesus hangs dying, defeated, utterly alone, and we confess that this is God's crowning glory, the salvation of the world. In a world that only understands power, force and competition, this is as objectionable as Paul boasting in his weakness and the vehicle of God's grace: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."



Every day you and I presented with situations where we have to make a choice about following through on our commitment to follow Jesus. It might something as simple as stopping to help someone, or refusing to be another link in a chain of gossip. It could be calmly and gently speaking about the way that your faith in Jesus influences what you believe about a moral issue, or how it shapes the way you spend your money, or your time. Are you even willing to risk others being offended by what you believe?

The rejection of Jesus in his hometown is a sober message to his church. First of all it asks us where we stand in relation to our Lord, and our Saviour? Secondly, it reminds that the church itself has become an offence to the society whose values and laws Christian faith helped shape. How do we respond to that, with love and in integrity?

After Jesus was rejected by those who knew him, he simply got on with the job at hand, going around “teaching from village to village.” He called the “twelve, sending them out two by two and he gave them authority over evil spirits.” There was work to be done: the work of getting the good news out into the lives of all people. God continues this same work of Jesus today through us. Are you following? Amen.

