

Sermon for Proper 9, Year B

The text: Mark 6:1–13

In several chapters preceding our text, Mark draws readers to stand on the shore, jostling among the crowd to get a glimpse of Jesus and hear him speak. In chapter 4, we hold on for dear life with the disciples in the boat nearly swamped by a furious storm on the Sea of Galilee. We see the Synagogue ruler, Jairus, fall at Jesus' feet, pleading with him to go and heal his dying daughter in chapter 5 and then, as we follow behind, we witness a woman, who has been trapped by 12 years of bleeding, touch Jesus' garment to be healed instantly, before Jesus dismisses her in peace. We are confronted by the painful wailing of mourners at Jairus' home after his daughter dies. We look on in astonishment with her parents as Jesus brings the little girl back to life simply by taking her by the hand and telling her to get up. Mark shows us that nothing is impossible for this Jesus – he is clearly the Son of God, who effortlessly exercises mastery over creation – and nature, sickness and even death are subject to Jesus' authority.

Today, Mark shows us that not only is Jesus the true God from all eternity but fully human, too. Jesus has a *hometown* he returns to – Nazareth – where he is well known to residents: 'Isn't this the carpenter?' they ask. 'Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?' In fact, the people from Jesus' hometown see him as *only* human. As Jesus began to teach, many who heard him were bewildered that Jesus could be something special. 'Where did this man get these things?' they asked. 'What's this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing?' This is the one they know so well – he's a local boy, an ordinary person just like themselves, the carpenter. They knew him – this man – and had never seen anything wonderful in him as he lived among them. The astonishing things they have heard about must, therefore, surely be beyond him.

It seems that this is anything but a happy homecoming for Jesus. In fact, Mark tells us that the congregation took offence at him. In stark contrast to the forces of nature and the dead who instantly obey Jesus' powerful word, those in the synagogue reject him. Mark tells us that Jesus was astonished at their lack of faith and couldn't do any miracles there. That's not because Jesus needs human faith to be able to do miracles, as if he were dependent on us – but, because they disbelieved Jesus could ever be anything more than Mary's son, the local carpenter, very few approached him for his miraculous help.

It seems anything like this setting is some 2,000 years ago in Nazareth. It seems like it's talking about the communities around us today – people who, at best, don't think anything special of Jesus and don't seek him for the saving help and divine favour they need ... and, at worst, take offence at him and reject him. So where to from here, in 21st-century Western culture that is so closed to the church? Where to for us here 2,000 years on from the setting Mark shares with us, thousands of kilometres away from Nazareth? How can we survive, let alone thrive?

Questions like these have led to all kinds of opinions. The language used in one of the latest mission trends is: 'Rediscovery of what it means to be an authentic church.' A quick search on the internet shows an abundance of books and blog sites about being an 'authentic church'. There's even a church called Authentic Church in White Plains, New York. Are we an authentic church? We might ourselves have all sorts of opinions about what it means to be an authentic church. How would we know or decide whether that is true or not?

Today's text gives us some really helpful answers. First, the church is Christ's creation. He called the disciples to him to hear his teaching and shape them by it and then sent them out as his partners in ministry with his authority. The church, then, is not firstly a building; it is the people of God called by Christ to himself, who he commissions to be his modern-day disciples. For us, that began at our baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and continues with the teaching and learning of everything Jesus has commanded.

Second, an authentic church does not rely on the appeal of gimmicks, the lure of prosperity or the charisma of its people. The church is to rely on Christ and Christ alone. In our text, Jesus commanded the disciples: 'Take nothing for the journey except a staff – no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra shirt.' The One who is true God and exercises mastery over storms, sickness, health, life, death and the kingdom of darkness is also fully human just as the disciples are, understands all their human needs, and will care for them and provide for them. Jesus also teaches us to be absolutely dependent upon him, not trusting in our own resources but resourcing from him.

One of the ways God cares for his people and meets their practical needs is through the care of others in the church itself. God did provide for the disciples – not by making clothes, money and bread appear miraculously, but by serving them himself through the hospitality of those in the church. He said to them: 'Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town.' God provided through these hosts who opened their homes. Just like Jesus' disciples had to learn to be dependent on others, so too do we, for none of us are self-sufficient. Don't think you can be, for we are all in need, even though it can sometimes injure personal pride in asking your brothers and sisters for help. For God himself serves us through the hospitality of others.

God also calls us to be a host on whom others can depend, for God has blessed us and provided what we need to be daily bread for others. Everything we do in the congregation must never be for our own benefit and self-service but always for the service and benefit of others – and not just those we like or get on well with. Neither is it always just the ill, hospitalised or grieving who need our help. Often, those who need our help are struggling in their daily routines, and their real need for help is masked by normality. Who is it who doesn't have a strong family network? Who is it who doesn't have transport? Who is it who we don't really know in the congregation? The caring hospitality we extend doesn't stop within this building as though we are some exclusive club – but we're no good to the world without continuing to show care and hospitality to one another.

Thirdly, just as Jesus provided for the practical needs of the disciples, he also provided what they gave for mission: his authority to unlock the kingdom of heaven for people trapped in the kingdom of darkness through his word. The writer to the Hebrews says that the word of God is powerful, active and sharper than any double-edged sword; it pierces right to our core to judge the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Through Isaiah, God himself said that his word would not return to him empty but accomplish all he desires. The disciples didn't need anything else, even in Nazareth and the villages with so many people closed to them. They had the Lord over all creation with them and his powerful word that creates belief from unbelief and sustains and perfects saving faith.

The disciples went out and preached that people should repent. At the beginning of Mark's Gospel, we hear that John the Baptist proclaimed a baptism of *repentance*, and that's the same message of Jesus. It would seem that an authentic church would proclaim the same message. The message of an authentic church will not solely be that God loves all, for we only receive God's favour and salvation through faith, and that faith will indeed hate sin and be sorry for the sins we commit ourselves. Some say that repentance is offensive today and that today's church should be more progressive and proclaim a more relevant message that people are more inclined to want to hear.

But repentance has always been offensive to proud human ears. Such proclamation was just as undesirable back then as it is today. The town of Nazareth and the villages to which Jesus sent the disciples were no different to society today. In their natural state, the people were offended by Jesus and his disciples and didn't want to come to Jesus for saving help. Yet the disciples were to have the courage that Jesus himself was with them – those who welcomed them in their homes and the message they proclaimed welcomed Christ himself, as Jesus says in Luke: 'Whoever receives you receives me.'

The disciples didn't preach repentance only. 'Repentance' here means the whole of the Christian teaching, for repentance is always about turning – not turning away

from our sins but turning to Jesus with our sins for him to release us from them. So, in chapter 1 of his gospel, Mark says that John the Baptist preached 'A baptism of repentance *for the forgiveness of sins*' and Jesus proclaimed, 'The kingdom of heaven is near' (that is, close to them by his presence), therefore, they were to 'Repent and believe the good news'... That is, as the kingdom of heaven has come near in the person of Christ who stands before them, they are to turn to him with their sins for him to free them.

This is the message of the authentic church. It is the very message through which Christ and the Holy Spirit powerfully go to work so that people know and believe the truth, joyfully and willingly seek to do God's will and strive daily to lead a holy life just as Christ himself has made us holy, as we confessed this morning. This is not just proclaimed from the pulpit but by each of us as we live out our baptismal grace, when we daily drown the old sinful nature, as Martin Luther put it. The need for repentance is proclaimed by all of us whenever we gather together as the body of Christ like we have today, to be absolved by our Lord and to be served by him at his table as we eat his body and drink his blood to receive forgiveness, life and salvation, and to receive his Spirit anew through this holy meal to grow in and share his gentleness, forgiveness, grace, love, patience and encouragement with others.

What it means for the church to be authentic in today's Nazareth culture surely means being no different to what the early church was, and continuing on as the early church began – dwelling with Jesus and following him through the word. Indeed, we have everything we need to be an authentic church in the world and to make a powerful difference in the lives of those we know and love and come to meet. We have Mary's son from Nazareth, the Son of God from heaven who has overcome sickness, death and the kingdom of darkness.

He is here for you to continue his ministry among us and through us as he calls us to himself to meet with us and serve us through his word and sacrament by which he still exercises his power and authority here in our midst – the authority to forgive all sin. He is the one who shows hospitality to you, serving his own body and blood so that his strength is made perfect in your weakness, and his grace is sufficient for you, even when we think we make a real mess of mission. The mission is his in which he is the author and perfecter of faith, and his ministry continues despite the hardest unbelief. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you because of your faith in Christ, rejoice that your Heavenly Father has welcomed you through Jesus, and you have a place with him in heaven forever. Amen.