

**“ON THE ROAD AGAIN”(Mark 18)**  
***Mark 6:1-13***

After his tour around the eastern side of lake Galilee, where he liberated the demon-possessed man in the graveyard, and the village Capernaum on the western shore of the lake, where he announced the healing of the woman with a haemorrhage and gave Jairus back his daughter, Jesus decides to take a trip back home. With his little group of disciples, he walks across the hills from Capernaum to Nazareth and ends up on Saturday morning back in the synagogue, the local boy made good, the wandering rabbi, back with his students and invited to say a few words to the assembled worshippers.

Mark, once again, doesn't tell us exactly what he said – not even the gist of it, in this case – but it was clearly something that had a powerful effect on his listeners. Many of them, Mark notes, “*were amazed*”. Unfortunately, that amazement didn't mean a terribly positive response to his words. They start to remember who Jesus is – he's a local boy: all he is as far as they're concerned is the local carpenter, the *τεκτων*, a word which means general craftsman. His sisters and brothers (including two future contributors to the New Testament, James and Jude) are still around.

And he's “*Mary's son*”. There's a bit of debate about this way of referring to Jesus. You see, it's very, very unusual for anyone to refer to a person's mother as a means of identification. Nearly always it's the father's name which is used. Some people say that it's been copied wrong, that Mark wrote “*the son of the carpenter and Mary*.” Others say that this was put in to add weight to the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. Yet others – and I think I'd go along with this – think that Mark is actually reporting what was said by the villagers and that they were alluding to the rumour that Jesus was an illegitimate child, conceived out of wedlock, which, of course, he was. In other words, this is a kind of insult. “Jesus is certainly no better than anyone else in the synagogue that day – in fact, he's got a bit of a past, so what right has he got coming and trying to stir us up like this?” This Jesus is too ordinary for these people. They know him too well. And so they actually end up refusing to accept the evidence before them. The miracles he has done, the wisdom of his words, the authority with which he speaks, the little band of disciples – it doesn't really count for anything because they know that he's really just the little boy from up the road that everybody whispered about when he was born. They're too close to him.

So Jesus quotes a well-known contemporary proverb to them, a saying that is still used today – “*A prophet without honour ...*” But we are so used to the bit about, “*in his own country/home town*” that we miss the other part of it. Matthew records a bit more of the saying and Mark here seems to quote it fully, adding, “*among his relatives and in his own house*.” It's strange that over the past couple of weeks, several people here have spoken to me about the difficulty they have with their close family when it comes to witnessing or talking about Jesus. Here Jesus makes it explicit – it's not easy: in fact, it's well nigh impossible. Just think, when you're worrying about how you're going to get through to your son or your mother or your brother, and they seem to want nothing to do with the radically new agenda of the gospel of Jesus, he had the same trouble too – and he gave up pretty quickly.

Now, I'm not sure if that's a source of encouragement – in that Jesus shares our sense of frustration – or of abject despair – in that even Jesus couldn't get through. But there is nevertheless some encouragement that can be drawn from this – and we've already alluded to it. Jesus apparently could not get through to his mother and brothers and sisters. But I'm sure he prayed for them and continued to hang on to the hope that one day they would respond. And after his death and resurrection they did. Here's some words from *Acts 1:14*, where Luke talks about the new community of Jesus' followers in the days leading up to Pentecost: “*They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and with his brothers*.” And as, we said, James and Jude ended up actually contributing to the teaching of the early church through their letters in the New Testament, with James becoming the first bishop in Jerusalem.

What I'm saying is that it is very hard trying to witness to those who are closest to you. In a sense, you're too close. Whatever you say can be ignored because "It's only mum" or "You're my big brother and you always want me to do what you say". But don't give up praying and hoping. God can work through other people, too, and they'll come through in the end, as did Jesus' family.

But on this occasion, we are left with Mark's astounding comment on this episode, "*Jesus could not do any miracles there ...*" They just didn't have enough faith to make it worthwhile for Jesus to do anything other than a very few miracles. It's strange, isn't it, that in the previous story Jesus has found himself healing someone almost unconsciously because of the simple faith of the woman with the chronic bleeding. She had faith and it worked despite the fact that Jesus wasn't aware of it until it happened, and here, try as he might, Jesus cannot do anything because of a climate of unbelief. Where is the omnipotence of God now? How can his power be so severely limited by human response? Big questions, to which I do not have the answer this morning. Lots of people have tried to explain it all away, but I think Mark probably intends it to be left hanging in the air – almost a warning that without faith there isn't a great deal of point in seeking Jesus.

Whatever it all means, Jesus has had enough. No point banging your head against a brick wall indefinitely: it's a waste of time and energy – and it wears you down. So he sets off to go elsewhere, off into the villages dotted around the hills – a lot of small settlements, a lot of needy people, and Jesus is on foot and subject to the limitations of his human body. So he decides to send out his disciples to let them have a go at proclaiming the message of the Kingdom. After all, they've had plenty of time now to pick up some of Jesus' message and methods, and he adds to that human training the supernatural power of his own authority.

There's something of a plan here, a strategy for mission which is worth noting, not for the actual details of the plan – which are pretty closely linked to the contemporary context – but the fact that there is a some kind of plan at all. When we're just witnessing by our lives to our friends and neighbours, our family and colleagues, then the way in which we communicate the love of Jesus Christ to them is to some extent spontaneous. We pray for opportunities and for the wisdom and courage to speak into them. But when it's a question of an organisation – a group or church or mission agency – then I think we do need to give some thought to our strategy, to what we're doing and why. If we don't, we end up wasting time, resources and energy. Jesus knew he could not reach all the villages, but he knew he had a rich set of resources in the twelve disciples, so he used them to extend the effectiveness of his own ministry.

Let's just look at his particular plan and see why it might have been tailored to that situation. Firstly, "*he sent them out two by two.*" There are various very good reasons for this. To start with they were travelling between settlements across rough terrain which was the home to bandits and thieves – as Jesus mentions in his story of the Good Samaritan. Personal safety was involved. It would also be good to have companionship, to have someone to talk to when things weren't going quite so well and to rejoice with when it all went just as planned – someone to pray with and to weep with. But it was also to be a source of credibility. This was a totally new message, a completely fresh agenda that they were proclaiming: there was no New Testament to quote, no long tradition of theology based on Jesus' teaching, no history and tradition of Christian witness. People might be sceptical, but when there were two witnesses, there was much greater degree of credibility, and it was even enshrined in their Law (*Deuteronomy 17:6* for example).

They were to travel very light – no food, no begging bag, not even any small change wrapped up in their belts. They were not to take an extra tunic to keep them warm if they found no lodging for the night. Their only resource should be a complete dependency on God and his provision for them. Most people at that time, it has to be admitted, wouldn't have had a great deal anyway, but even the things they did have in terms of material possessions were to be renounced in favour of a reliance on God. Of course, they hadn't given these things up completely for ever: when they returned from their mission, presumably,

they'd still all have their tunics and so on back at home, but actually setting off without them was scary enough to concentrate their minds and their faith on God.

They were not to take a tunic because they were to have faith that God would lead them to a place where they could find hospitality each night. And they were to stick with the first place offered – no wandering about looking for a better deal the next night! And no opportunities for the villagers to compete for the attention of the preachers. (It's interesting that in a book of Christian teaching written in the second century, *The Didache*, people are warned to be wary of itinerant preachers who stay *more* than three nights in one house!)

If the reception they received was unwelcoming and the people wanted nothing to do with their message, the disciples were to leave with a gesture that may seem strange to us today – they were to shake the dust off their sandals in a very public way. At this time, Jewish people who found themselves having to cross Gentile territory or, in some kind of extremity, go into a Gentile home – Gentiles, of course, being ritually unclean to the Jewish way of thinking – they would have a good shake of their feet and clothes when they left that place, in order not to carry any unclean dust and so on back into their ritually clean Jewish environment. As well as the literal issue of uncleanness, it was a symbolic way of saying, “We don't want any of your pagan ways over here, thank you very much!” And so Jesus' disciples were making it clear that they did not want to carry any of the unbelieving ways of their unresponsive audience away with them.

So, you see, the specifics of this plan are not necessarily to be followed to the letter for all time – indeed, if you look at the stories in the book of *Acts*, you'll see that Paul and the other apostles didn't stick rigidly to the details here. This is not the only way that mission can be done, but the principles – integrity, fellowship, single-mindedness, reliance on God – are surely still appropriate: more than that, indispensable. As is the underlying pattern of mission which Mark records in vv12,13.

Firstly, the disciples are sent out **to proclaim the new agenda**. The content of their mission is that “*people should repent*”. We're back to that clarion call that Jesus gave as his ministry began back in 1:15. The disciples are to call people to the point where they can give up their own agendas and trust Jesus for his. They are preaching a message which highlights the inadequacy of relying on their ways of doing things, on their own schemes and strategies for getting the best out of life, of discovering a hope for the future, and which points clearly to the benefits of the new kingdom that Jesus has come to inaugurate.

We may shy away from the word “*repent*” today, but what we have to tell the communities in which we live and work amounts to the same thing. To those who are hurting, to those who are burdened by the pressure of making their own way or by the weight of other people's expectations, to those struggling to fulfil an agenda set by the world around, to those who despair of any chance of a hopeful future, we say loudly and clearly, “It does not have to be like this. There is an alternative!” All it takes, as we said last week, is the guts to leave that other agenda behind and trust Jesus for what he has to offer. It is a turning around, a new perspective, a μετάνοια, a repentance. Any attempt at witnessing to the world around that does not have that at its heart is doomed to fail.

Secondly, the disciples are sent out **to push forward the boundaries of the Kingdom**. Jesus gives them authority to “*drive out ... demons*”. This mission in which we are engaged is, at root, confrontational. That doesn't mean that we are to be aggressive in the way we speak, to beat people over the head with verses from the Bible, to tell them what horrible sinners they are, to provoke them to a response with unhelpful accusations. What it means is that, when we announce the good tidings of the new agenda, when we hold out the hope of a different future, we come up against those forces which have a vested interest in clinging to the old agenda, the forces of evil. The extending of the frontiers of the Kingdom of God will naturally make inroads into the territory of its enemies and they do not like that.

Now, as I've said before, I firmly believe in the existence of supernatural forces of evil and the possibility of their manifesting themselves in the form of demons. And we need to take that very seriously whenever it occurs. But there are other ways in which our mission is to confront those forces of evil, other areas of our life where we need to push forward the borders of God's Kingdom of *shalom*. The demonic, if you want to use that shorthand, must be confronted in the structures which oppress and dehumanise men and women around the world, in the systems of war and military might, in the political philosophies of might is right and capital is intrinsically good, in the social experimentation which seeks to prove that unfettered self-gratification is the highest goal of humanity, in the petty nationalism of ethnic groups, in terrorism and corruption and repression and torture and religious extremism. If we are to proclaim to people that the new agenda of Christ is worth trusting in, then we have to be prepared to point out the moral, intellectual and spiritual bankruptcy of the old agenda.

Which is where the third strand comes in. The disciples are sent out **to provide wholeness for the broken and the hurting**. Using the spiritual power and authority which Jesus had given them, these first missionaries brought healing, *shalom*, to those whom they met. They confronted the powers of evil, but saw that it was in individual lives that the Kingdom began to be seen. Brian Nicholls, one of our Baptist regional ministers, talks of "*transforming the nation one life at a time.*"

Once again, let me stress that I believe totally in the power of God to heal those who are ill – if I didn't we wouldn't hold regular services of healing, and I wouldn't bother praying for healing with people. It happens and I have seen it happen. But it's not just the instant effect of physical healing that needs to be part of our mission. There are people whose whole lives are wrecked by trauma, by abuse, by violence, by neglect, by the forces of evil working insidiously to empty them of hope and wholeness. Without wishing to detract for one moment from the need for us to have faith for physical healing, I believe that the mission of Jesus Christ drives us to reach out to those who are wounded, to those who are hurting, who are in despair, who can see no future for themselves, who have no hope for eternity. Relationships need to be restored, dignity needs to be given back, a new perspective needs to be opened up for many people. And you and I, who have had our perspective broadened by the love of Jesus Christ, who have had the opportunity to hear of and respond to the new agenda of Jesus Christ and his Kingdom, have a duty, an obligation to share that with others.

And the important phrase here for us today is at the beginning of *v12* – "*They went out ....*" To fulfil the calling that he had, Jesus did not hold a crusade in the synagogue: he did not have a tent mission: he did not sit around and wait for people to come to him – although they did that, in droves. He sent out his followers to take the good news of the Kingdom, to proclaim the new agenda for life lived to the full to people where they were. And he still does that today. You and I are called to get stuck into the life of this community and in doing so to let people know that life does not have to be the way it seems, to declare the alternative, to confront the forces of evil as we raise our prophetic voice and subscribe to Kingdom values, to share the love of Jesus himself with the wounded and hurting in God's world. And do you know what really makes this exciting? You have the authority of Jesus to do it – and accepting that authority, together with the responsibilities that entails, means you can have the power of his Holy Spirit to help you. Get out there and give 'em he... heaven!

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. How do you feel about telling your close friends and family about Jesus and the gospel?
2. Was Jesus really unable to do any miracles in Nazareth? Why do think that was? What is the relationship between the miraculous and faith?
3. Are Jesus' instructions in *vv8,9* to be followed today? Why/why not?
4. How long do we keep trying until giving up and "*shaking the dust off our feet*"?

5. How can we “*drive out demons*” today? In what areas do we need to confront the forces of evil?
6. What does it mean to have “*the authority of Jesus*”?
7. What particular things have you learned from this passage?