

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 39”

Matthew 13:53-58

I suppose if you wanted to give this little episode a title it might be “*The Visiting Preacher*” or “*Local Boy Made Good*”. Jesus has finished another session of teaching – mainly in parables throughout chapter 13, and Matthew moves the story on with the little phrase “*When Jesus had finished these parables ...*”, which we also find in 7:28, 11:1, 19:1 and 26:1 as markers in his ongoing story. From that section of Jesus’ teaching, Matthew turns back to the narrative, to the story of Jesus’ life and ministry.

We’ve been reading about Jesus moving around Galilee and neighbouring areas, but now he returns to his own town – although Matthew doesn’t name it – to Nazareth. And on the Sabbath he is invited to speak at his local synagogue. There weren’t usually fixed preachers in the synagogue, so if anyone turned up who was reckoned to be worth hearing, they’d be asked to say a few words. And Jesus, being fairly well-known in the town, is given the opportunity to get up and preach. Matthew records that the people who were there that day were “*amazed*”. Once again, Jesus makes a powerful impression on those who hear him.

If Jesus started his ministry around the age of thirty, as many people believe, then he would have spent the best part of his childhood, youth and early adult life in Nazareth. Everyone knows his family – he’s a son of the carpenter. The way Matthew phrases that implies that there was only one carpenter – or builder – in the town, so he would have been easily identifiable. And they know his mum, his brothers and his sisters, too. Now he seems to have made something of himself – or, at least, made a name for himself in the area – so it’s good to have him back there in the pulpit, as it were.

And they know not only all about his family background, but they’re also aware of his wisdom. Some of them will have heard him on other occasions in the hills around the town, or even down on the beach at Capernaum. And those who haven’t heard him themselves would very probably have heard about his teaching through others who had been there. They also know about his “*miraculous powers*”. Although he hasn’t done much in the way of miracles in Nazareth itself, word would have travelled of his healings in the area and the other wonders that he has performed in neighbouring villages such as Cana, where he turned the water into wine. Amazing stuff, indeed.

But their reaction to all this is to “*take offence*” at him. Literally, they were “*scandalised*” by him. It’s an interesting word that Matthew uses here and it’s found only in the New Testament, not in any other Greek literature – although words from the same basic root do occur. In some places it is translated into English as “*fall away*”, but in many places it is used to suggest that whatever happened that caused offence was simply incompatible with their preconceptions. What Matthew is saying here is that Jesus

was saying and doing things which the people just couldn't cope with because they had a very different view of what Jesus should and shouldn't be doing. He was the local builder's son, so what right did he have to be saying these things? What power was he tapping into that enabled him to work these wonders? It just wasn't on!

Jesus points out, in a little proverbial saying about prophets and their home towns, that this is par for the course. No-one's ever really listened to by the people who know them best. It's a kind of "familiarity breeds contempt" moment. But as a result of that he doesn't do many miracles because of his frustration with them and, perhaps, the idea that they just couldn't cope with him doing anything else. It's not that he *can't* do any miracles – clearly he does a few and his power is in no way limited by other people's opinion of him – but he just doesn't do much because of the reception he knows he'll get: people not being able to get their head round it and therefore assuming it's somehow not right. These people who knew him, who knew what he could do, who had heard his teaching and had even expressed their amazement at him, were just not prepared to put up with anything that challenged their ideas about him. As Martin Goldsmith puts it in his book about Matthew's Gospel, Jesus "*looked for true faith in himself as Messiah before he could exercise his Kingdom authority in their midst.*"

There are some fairly clear parallels between that story and our situation as Christians a couple of thousand years on, I would suggest. Just like those townspeople of Nazareth, we feel we know all about Jesus. We've got these Gospel accounts, to start with. We know the story of Jesus and we can call up plenty of facts about him and the historical context in which he lived. We've read about him in other books and heard plenty of sermons about him. We may even have grappled with some of the theological issues about him.

And, again, like many of the people of Nazareth, many of us would say that we not only know about him, but we know him. We would claim to have a personal relationship with him and rejoice in that, too. We know about his wisdom and his teaching – teaching that is beyond just the bare facts, teaching that helps us make sense of life and enables us to enjoy life maybe a bit more than once we did.

We may also have experience of his miraculous powers. We may have read books or magazine articles, we've heard missionaries and others talk about the mighty works that Jesus has done in other places or at other times in history. Like those synagogue-goers in Nazareth, we find ourselves amazed at Jesus, at his teaching and at what he can do.

But quite a bit of the time we are also "*offended*" by him, scandalised by him. When he's teaching he just doesn't know where to stop and makes the kinds of demands on us that we're not quite prepared to

give in to. We can cope with being hospitable – to people we know and who are like us. We can cope with giving to those in need – so long as it leaves plenty for us. We can cope with offering forgiveness to those who have wronged us – at least, to those who are prepared to say sorry. We can cope with putting Jesus first in our lives – well, when we're singing about it on Sunday, but we'd need to think a bit more carefully about the rest of the week. But Jesus asks us to go further than we are often prepared to do.

And when it comes to the miraculous, to acts of mighty power – well, that's where the difficulty really starts. It isn't really compatible with our preconceptions, is it? It doesn't quite accord with our very scientific, rationalistic way of looking at things. It doesn't really coincide with our worldview these days.

In fact, it's not quite what we expect, given our theology, our way of thinking about Jesus. Fair enough, he could do it when he was around. Yes, we can marvel at things that have happened in history when God seems to have moved in unusual ways in revival and in powerful ways in people's lives. We don't doubt the missionary prayer letters or the testimonies at Spring Harvest and New Wine, but we don't for one moment believe that Jesus could do that here. Do we?

Why not? Isn't that just the situation that Matthew is reporting here? They were amazed at Jesus and at his words and works, but they didn't – for whatever reason – believe that he would do it there, in Nazareth amongst ordinary men and women and children. So he didn't.

We find ourselves amazed at the stuff we've heard and seen and read about what Jesus can do. But whereas he might do it at Soul Survivor or Fresh Streams, we don't really believe it could happen here on a Sunday morning or during house group on a Wednesday night. I think we may be losing out on something because of our lack of openness to his power. We may, strangely, be limiting what we experience of Jesus because we just couldn't cope with having to believe it if it happened.

We're on sermon number 39 of this journey through Matthew's Gospel and we've read about some wonderful things that Jesus did, we've heard some wonderful things that he said. I'm sure most of us would say that we believe it all. We've talked about it over coffee and at house groups. We claim to follow this Kingly Messiah about whom we've been reading. So why can't we believe that his power is still available today? What is holding us back? What is preventing Jesus through his Holy Spirit showing us mighty wonders today? Just like the situation in Nazareth, it's our lack of belief – not unbelief, really; more disbelief – our lack of faith, I would suggest.

We need to expect more of Jesus. We need to be more eager to have him work in our lives. We need to open ourselves up to him and his activity – open our hearts, open our minds. Now, after years of

assuming he can't or won't do anything, that might be a scary prospect, but I'd like to suggest that we pray that God will open us up to the amazing things he wants to do amongst us, that we pray for him to do miracles – mighty acts – again. Let's pray for a sense of anticipation, of expectancy, and an awareness that God wants to do much more among us than we are currently allowing him to do.

As we have been reminding ourselves over the past few weeks – on our Awayday and in other places – we have a great big God and he is wanting to show us his great big love by working among us. That's not so that we can hold some kind of spiritual cabaret – all kinds of spectacular goings on that will arouse people's curiosity but little more – but so that his glory can be shown and so that people can be drawn to him by the amazing glimpses he might afford us of what it's like in his Kingdom. It's so that his love can be seen and his power demonstrated and his purposes fulfilled. Do you want that to happen? Do you believe that it can? Let's pray ...

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In the episode Jesus returns to his own town and on the Sabbath he is invited to speak at his local synagogue. Matthew records that the people who were there that day were "*amazed*". Everyone knows his family. They're also aware of his wisdom and his "*miraculous powers*". Although he hasn't done much in the way of miracles in Nazareth itself, word would have travelled of his healings in the area and the other wonders that he has performed in neighbouring villages such as Cana, where he turned the water into wine.

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Questions for discussion

1. Why does familiarity breed contempt? Is there any way we can stop that happening in our Christian lives?
2. What was it about the townspeople's attitude that prevented Jesus doing any miracles there?
3. Share with the group any miraculous signs that you have witnessed.
4. Do you think miracles happen today? In what circumstances? If not, why not?
5. Why do you think we hear of miracles in other places but not here?
6. Pray for a greater sense of God's presence and power.