

THOSE THAT SPEAK FOR GOD: 14th SUNDAY B

When people from ordinary backgrounds become celebrities, e.g. Meghan Markle, now the wife of Prince Harry, the football star David Beckham, and the pop idols Adele and Guy Sebastian, journalists and television crews often seek out the family and neighbours of the new star to find out what they think of their local boy or girl made good. Mixed impressions and reactions are given. Some show their surprise, some their shock, some their delight, some their pride. But others show their disbelief or jealousy. While some locals claim they saw it all coming, others refuse to admit that anything out of the ordinary has happened. They urge caution, and claim that all the hype and hoopla will soon fizzle out. The saying is just too true: 'Familiarity breeds contempt!'

In our Gospel today Jesus comes back to his home town of Nazareth. This is not a social visit. Like the other towns in Galilee, Nazareth too has to hear the Good News that with Jesus God has stepped into this world and begun to rule over everything and everyone as their King. When Jesus highlights this in their local synagogue, his listeners are amazed. They wonder about the wise things he has said, about where he got his ideas, and about how on earth he has been curing so many sick and handicapped persons. But despite their favourable first impressions of him, they later let their prejudices, their prejudgments, take over. They decide that all along Jesus has been fooling them into thinking he's someone special. 'Just who does he think he is?' they sneer, 'Local boy made good? No way!'

They try to cut him down to size, their own size. They sniff: 'Once a carpenter always a carpenter! Don't we all know his mother, his sisters and his brothers? There's nothing special about them. He's got too big for his boots!' Mark summarises their negative reactions in six sad words: 'And they would not accept him.' For them his sheer ordinariness as their local tradesman cancels out their first impressions of his new and special wisdom and of the reports reaching them from other places of his extraordinary deeds.

How does Jesus react to these locals and their prejudices against him? In the words of the story-teller, he is 'amazed at their lack of faith'. So he tells them: 'A prophet [i.e. one who speaks for God] is only despised in his own country among his own relations and in his own house.' Mark has told us already that even members of his own family were convinced he was out of his mind (3:21). His being rejected by his former friends and neighbours now makes his experience of rejection complete.

His rejection in Nazareth by his own people also makes him powerless for the most part to work any miracle among them. The negative way they react to him and their lack of trust actually limits his ability. So after curing just 'a few sick people', he moves elsewhere, and it seems, sad to say, that having moved on he never sets foot in Nazareth again.

In the 1960s there was a popular song called 'The Sounds of Silence'. One remarkable line says: 'The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls. The messages of prophets are two-way communication. They state what God wants to tell people for their own good. But rejection or resistance to the message tells God what the people think of both the message and the messenger.'

I think you will probably agree that it's an extremely painful thing to try to tell someone what they need to hear for their own good only to be told: 'What's it got to do with you? You back off, you butt out!' Parents know that pain, when their children tell them 'What would you know? You're so last century, so out of date! You're a has-been, you're a loser!', or something else just as rude and insulting. Teachers know the pain of it when their pupils just scoff or giggle at the lesson they've so carefully prepared and presented. Police know the pain of resistance and opposition when they try to restore order in the midst of mob madness or violence, and for their trouble are spat upon and called 'pigs' or worse by drunken revellers.

Day by day you and I face situations in which God is calling us to stop, look and listen, in order take in and accept some message for our good, a message being delivered to us by another person in our lives, someone who is on our side, someone who is also a real prophet, a spokesperson for God, an actual godsend, whether they know it or not.

So in our prayer together today let us ask God both for ourselves and one another, that we might always be open to hearing and heeding the Word of God, in whatever way God speaks to us, and through whatever person or persons God sends us as his messengers, his agents, his angels!

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