

Sunday, July 4, 2021

Sermon by Father David Bumsted

*O Almighty God, who pourest out on all who desire it the spirit of grace and of supplication: Deliver us, when we draw near to thee, from coldness of heart and wanderings of mind, that with steadfast thoughts and kindled affections we may worship thee in spirit and in truth; in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Good Morning!

Over the past few weeks, we have enjoyed some of the more action packed portions of St. Mark's account of the Gospel, from the calming of the sea and waves at the back half of Chapter 4, to his tour of healing throughout Chapter 5. We've heard again the confusion of Jesus' closest friends and disciples on the boat as they hadn't quite come to grips with the fullness of who their teacher was. We've also heard again how a bunch of strangers seemed to better grasp the divine power available to Jesus, even in odd places like foreign graveyards, within the midst of the melee of a crowd, and even within the walls enclosing the tumult of fresh grief at the passing of a child. In my pop-culture addled mind, I think back over the past few weeks of readings from Mark, and I can't help but think of a really well edited montage, maybe even one from an 80's movie with a really great driving soundtrack.

Think about it. If you've ever seen a movie with a well done montage section, it always brings you up to date with a character's progression, but without having to take too much of the movie's runtime. It's a really neat little trick of editing that good filmmakers can use to develop their stories. It should be no surprise then, that editing has been an important part of effective storytelling

since human beings thought to tell them. And believe me, St. Mark is a fantastic storyteller and one of the ways we know that is his masterful use of editing and structure.

We can actually see that expert use of structure in today's lesson from Mark, in a couple of different ways actually. The first way we see Mark's skill as a writer is the way he ultimately pulls together the preceding text in the first part of today's lesson where Christ is rebuffed in his own town. It's a remarkable contrast to the amazing progress he made in his travels, and we'll explore that a bit this morning. The other skillful move Mark makes is how he expertly buttresses that scene in Nazareth with the next major section of the Gospel text where we find Christ's teaching around the villages and his sending of the apostles, even knowing that they wouldn't always be well received.

That first scene I mentioned is kind of a doozy, though. Again, Jesus was coming off a series of big wins around Galilee, but when he got to his hometown, it seems like someone hit the brakes on the party bus. At first, it seemed like he was doing really well preaching and teaching in the synagogue, but even his mastery of the text and the witness of his works were not enough to break the contempt of familiarity. His neighbors remembered where he came from, who his family was, and how they made their living. You can hear them say "Jesus from around the block, the builder's kid, right? Yeah we know that guy and he's not that special." And once his hometown crowd started to take offense at him, their hearts were miles away from the likes of the folks we met last week; the ones who knew they could be healed just by being around Jesus. His response to the rebuff of his neighbors was a sad summary of the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, basically that

nobody listens to the prophets, and certainly not the people who know them best.

Hitting such a wall would seem like a pretty sad way to end the last little series of travels and healings. Mark comes right out and says that he could do no deed of power among them, and that Jesus marveled at their unbelief. Of course, sandwiched between those laments, we find a little detail that lets us know that there's still gas in the tank of the party bus, even if the e-brake's been pulled. Did you notice that even when Mark says he could do no deed of power, that Jesus still "laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them"? It's a way for both Jesus and our Gospel writer to slyly let us know that the doubt of his neighbors was not really enough to stop him from working out God's restorative work. Thus, the amazing work we saw in the previous chapters, the calming of the wind and sea, the healing mission, remained in effect, though the reader is now more aware of the fact that there are, sadly, just some people who weren't going to be joining up with Jesus for what was coming next. A sad reality that we live with even to this day, of course.

And yet, the mission to preach the good news of God's restorative Kingdom would enter into a new phase. Before, the disciples were pretty much in an apprenticeship, learning from Jesus and watching his work among the sick and suffering. By the second part of today's lesson, they had seen triumph and disappointment. They had been party to the heights of what was possible when people had even a little bit of trust that Jesus could help them, and of course now the depths of offense and rejection both by Jesus' religious adversaries, and the general apathy of his countrymen. As a new section begins in Mark's Gospel, Jesus was preparing his friends to go do what he was doing, to go do the earliest work of the Church in the world. He gave

them instruction on how to prepare for that work, to move carefully, humbly, and simply. They were to travel lightly, in recognition that God would provide for their needs. And yes, Jesus let them know how to deal with the folks that would behave like the Pharisees, Scribes, and general population of his hometown. And, even in this brief section, we read that they were successful. They preached repentance, that people should turn away from their sin and towards God, and even worked out God's restorative power among the sick and the suffering.

Therefore, all the cool stuff that we read about, and even some of the lame stuff, stacks up at this place in the way that Mark sets up his story. What's to come is pretty interesting for sure, but today this lesson gives us this incredible turning point, at the juncture of Christ's working of power among those that trust him in faith, and the people who had no interest. There's a realism in the way that this all comes together in Mark's sixth chapter, a window into how Christ's followers can proceed even to this day; perhaps even something we can appreciate as American Christians on this Independence Day. First, let us not treat Jesus as his neighbors did, missing the fullness of his love, grace, beauty, and truth. It is better for us to approach him with the trust of faith, such that he can bind up the wounds of our human frailty, changing our hearts that they would orient themselves towards him and towards one another (even perhaps, the people we aren't supposed to like according to the narrative the world feeds us). Second, let us take what Jesus has given us and take it to the places where he puts us. There are times when the missionary work of the Church looks like a neat outreach program, or a series of slick initiatives. Most of the time, the work of the Church of the world is simpler, perhaps more profound and person to person. If our hearts

are truly healed, changed towards God and our neighbor, then we can go anywhere bearing the gifts of Christ's love in the power of the Spirit.

Despite the challenges that we face as a parish, those we face as the gathered people of God, as Jesus- followers in Tulsa, in Oklahoma, in America, following after Christ in a way consonant with what we have observed in today's text will help us along the way to encouraging that which is best about the country we live in, working to increase virtue, peace, health, flourishing, and justice. Conversely, following closely after Christ will transform us towards righteousness and away from ungodliness, helping us to repent from all those things that work against the purposes of God, even and especially suspicion and hatred. Therefore, I bid you a happy fourth of July, grateful for the chance we have to celebrate and relax, and also mindful of what God means to do in and through us in Christ as we remain devoted to him with our whole heart, and united to one another in pure affection.

Blessed be God in His Holy Name and to Him be all glory. Amen.