

# **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

## **Rejection**

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**

**Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> May 2012**

Mark 6:1-6, 14-29

Amos 7:10-17

What is it, do you think, that most people most fear when they think about telling other people about their faith? I think it is one of two things: either that the person they are talking to will come back at them with some unanswerable question; or that they will be personally rejected. The fear of being rejected is probably greatest when the person you are speaking to is a member of your own family or your closest circle of friends. No one wants to lose the sympathy of those who mean most to them and know them best.

This is true for preachers as well. Most preachers would rather not go back to the church where they grew up. The idea of preaching to the people who saw you progress through adolescence is one which fills them with horror. (It's something I have never done myself). The horror is either because there may be things in the past, youthful indiscretions, which they would rather were forgotten (which is pride: the message of God's love can be more powerful when people are able to see how it has changed us.); or else it is because they know what is liable to be said about preachers in that place afterwards. In other words we may fear rejection because of who we have been or because of who we know the listeners to be. Having an intimate knowledge works both ways.

There can be a pride and judgementalism in a congregation of God's people which is very unattractive. You may have heard the phrase "Having roast preacher for Sunday lunch." When that happens, the person and the defects of the preacher and the message given are pulled apart and writ large, rather than the congregation listening to hear what, despite the preacher, God is saying to them. I remember a congregation I have known well finding it hard to get a new minister because no one was ever good enough, and some in the congregation thought that they merited a "big name" of their denomination. It never occurred to them that they could be a learning place for some new minister to find his or her feet; that they could be involved in giving a gift to the church. That congregational pride is the sort of attitude which leads to God not being able to do much in a place or with a group of people: they stand in his light, and think the light comes from them.

So the reluctance which you may feel about talking about your faith with those who know you, or have known you best, and the reluctance which some preachers have about going home may be that they know that your hearers are never satisfied with the messenger, that Jesus himself would not be good enough for them. As indeed he wasn't for his own congregation in Nazareth.

Rejection. It is a horrible feeling, and that is what it must have felt like to Jesus. He had met with all sorts of faith, from people who left their livelihoods to follow, to those who mobbed him

and wanted just a touch of his clothing, to the reluctant homage of the possessed. He had been asked to go away, because people found his power and his way of looking at the world too challenging. But always people had *believed* something about him: always they had believed that he was someone special.

When we read of what Herod heard people saying about Jesus, it may not be true, but it is positive, it shows that the reaction was curious but favourable. People thought he was John the Baptist, or Elijah, or a prophet. Which meant that they thought God was at work in him: resurrecting John, or bringing back Elijah, or intervening as he did in the days of the prophets of old. None of them was right, but for whatever reason, they were more on the right track than the people of Nazareth. They were willing to believe something. The people of Nazareth were not willing to believe anything.

In Nazareth, although they were amazed at his teaching, they could not see past the boy they had known growing up. And so they marvelled at his teaching, but rejected it. Maybe the people of Nazareth didn't think of it that way, as rejection. Maybe they thought of it as keeping his feet on the ground. Here was this man whom they had known in the carpenter's shop, whose brothers and sisters were still among them. How could he have come by this learning honestly? "Where did he get all this?" they asked. *They* couldn't have reached the conclusions he reached - so although they heard him with astonishment, and maybe agreed in their hearts with what he said, they also felt the need to cut him down to size, lest by comparison they feel small themselves. I recently heard the hymn-writer John Bell tell of how he went back to his home town to lead a service and teach songs. After the event was over he was greeted by an old woman with the words "I used to bath you!" Subtext "So you aren't anyone special, and don't you forget it." We Scots love to keep each other's feet on the ground, and sometimes it is necessary.

But there is a difference between keeping someone's feet on the ground and not believing he or she can be used by God.

The rejection of a person or his or her message can also come when you are among strangers. The prophet Amos went to the north kingdom to speak God's message and the officials there were outraged that this southerner should dare to speak to them in God's name. Amaziah's response to Amos showed that he thought that Amos was being deliberately disruptive, that Amos was someone who had chosen to come to Israel and make mischief. But Amos dismisses the title of prophet and tells of his humble background as a dresser of sycamore figs, to whom God had given a message and a mission, and from which he could not turn aside. That took courage. It would have been easier for him to shrug his shoulders and turn around and go back to his arboreal farming.

In the gospel we read, Jesus is rejected in Nazareth, and John the Baptist loses his life. These things don't necessarily happen at the same time: in fact John's death must have come first. Mark tells them together to highlight the cost of being an ambassador for God's Kingdom. In between the two incidents he tells of the sending out of the 12, to continue and expand Jesus' work. We shall look at that next week.

Rejection is just one of the perils a preacher of the Gospel must face. Jesus faced it in his home town: Amos faced it when he was far from home and seen as an interfering foreigner. John the Baptist's fate, the ultimate rejection, was one which many heralds of God's kingdom have come

to, and continue to come to. John was killed for speaking out against a moral wrong: something which the Jewish law specifically forbade was being done openly by a ruler, and example setter, in the kingdom.

Sometimes these days Christians can get caught up in religio-political violence, in places like Nigeria, where radical Islamic groups conflate politics with faith. Just this week university students and lecturers and worshippers at a communion service have been attacked and killed. There are sadly many Christians who have had to flee their homes for simply being quiet, law-abiding Christians in the "wrong" place. There are also Muslims who have been attacked, sadly some by Christians, others by more radical members of their own faith. Any such killing and disruptions is deeply sad. But it is different from what happened to John the Baptist and - as John's story is meant to remind us - to Jesus. *They* were not put to death for quietly getting on with their lives, but for speaking out.

John knew that he could not preach God's radical kingdom and keep silent about a blatant, known and obvious flouting of God's standards. He could not have one message for the ordinary folk but by silence permit a different standard for the rich and powerful. This is a battle Christians and others are still fighting in this country today, with campaigns for fairer taxation, with questions raised about parliamentary privilege, with accusations made and refuted about leaders being out of or in touch with the people. The message of both God's judgement and God's love and forgiveness is the same for everyone. John had to speak up or undermine his whole message.

There are times when we are called to do likewise. Any time we stick our heads above the parapet and allow others to know that we are citizens of God's kingdom, we have to be sure that our words and actions are consistent with our message. We are called on to talk about God's love and to show it; to talk about God's forgiveness and to show it. To talk about God's radical standards and view of life, and to model it in our own living. And if we do that: here where we have our home, or when we return to the places and families that raised us, we may find that we risk rejection. But we can't be a Christian in one place only and not another. John the Baptist didn't live that way. Jesus certainly didn't live that way.

Jesus was amazed at the unbelief of his home crowd, but it didn't stop him going on preaching and teaching and healing elsewhere. God's grace was still active in him for those who were willing to listen and look and learn. God promises that even though we face rejection - and that can hurt, and especially when it is from our families it can hurt a lot - but even though we face rejection, if we are consistent in our living and our talking of our faith, then we too can have the great privilege of being used to further his kingdom. Next week, when we look at the bits between these two gospel stories, we will see more about that.

Amen