

Sermon on Sunday 4 July 2021

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Rejecting rejection

'Remember, as far as anyone knows, we're a normal family.'

There is no such thing, of course, as a *normal* family. Every family has its distinctive quirks; its own unique dynamics and dysfunction. And often, we don't realise just how unique ours is until we step out of it.

And stepping out of those family dynamics is an essential part of growing up; it's how we begin to forge our own identity. The problem is that sometimes our families don't quite get that. After 53 years, they still see you as that boy with lop-sided national health specs who threw tantrums in toy shops.

Jesus had what I can only describe as an ambivalent attitude to family. At times, he seems at pains to detach himself, possibly to protect them, but also, to shake off the hold of their expectations and preconceptions. At one point, fearful that their eldest is making too many bad choices, his family stages an intervention, and Jesus point blankly refuses to see them, choosing to redefine 'family' as those who get what he's about.

In today's episode, Jesus discovers that the town that raised him is his toughest gig yet. It's a brave move returning to his home crowd. At first, they welcome him with open arms, bestowing on him the honour of speaking in the synagogue. And I imagine it was standing room only for this local boy-made-good. We're told that they were amazed, but not, it seems, in a good way. They're offended and we can only assume that Jesus must have touched

some raw nerve, appeared too cocky, too pious perhaps. And so, by way of bringing him down to earth, they sneer: 'Isn't this *Mary's* son?', which sounds perfectly innocent until you know that, in that culture, calling someone by their mother's name was a barbed attack on their parentage. In their eyes, Jesus would always be the illegitimate son, a stain on his family's reputation, an embarrassment to their community.

And so, Jesus responds with those now famous words: 'A prophet is not without honour, except in his home town'. In other words, on home territory, prophets aren't taken seriously.

A prophet is someone who speaks truth into a situation and often, of course, truth is inconvenient; uncomfortable, unwelcome. And, often, it's our own kin that find it hardest to hear.

We're told that Jesus could perform only a few miracles in Nazareth because of their lack of faith in him. It's the first failure, if you like, in his ministry, and I wonder how Jesus felt as he left. I imagine it was foremost in his mind when immediately afterwards he commissioned the disciples to go out in twos, instructing them to shake from their feet the dirt of those places that reject them.

There are, it seems, times when it's right to walk away, to shake off all that others project onto us.

If Jesus were to stand up in this church this morning and speak his inconvenient truth, how do you think we'd take it? My guess, is not so well.

In one of her sermons, Barbara Brown Taylor says: 'The biggest truth this story tells us is that the community of faith is one of Jesus' toughest audiences, especially when what he says offends us'. She goes on to say: 'We believe we know what is right and what is wrong and we do not welcome anyone who challenges our beliefs. And yet, God is dedicated to doing just that, because it is

the only way to get us to believe in God more than we believe in our own beliefs'.

That's challenging, isn't it? How often do we put our beliefs *about* God above our belief *in* God?

I've said it before, but the unexamined faith is not worth living. A static faith is a fossilised faith. God's track record is one of sending people (prophets) to shake up people of faith. If Jesus at times doesn't offend us, then maybe we've developed selective hearing. Maybe we've immunised ourselves with overfamiliarity. If we never question our faith, if we believe in exactly the same God we believed in 20 years ago, we need to ask ourselves - why is that? Is the Almighty so easily worked out? The moment we think that, is the moment we've lost him. If God is not revealing new insights about himself and ourselves, then that's either due to our lack of interest or our fear of feeling insecure.

Just as Jesus understood that those from our past can restrict our present, so we must be prepared to let go, shake off the beliefs we outgrow, and put our trust in the God who is always in front of us, always calling us forward into new territory and fresh revelation. A word of warning, however: when we listen to that call, prepare yourself for those who will not understand, who will think you have lost your way, who will perhaps see their rejection of you as a protection of the truth.

Rejection is a painful thing. It scars us. It surfaces a whole range of emotions from grief to rage. It can make us defensive, cause us to build walls to protect ourselves from getting hurt again, and that's never healthy. The best way to deal with rejection is, I think, to become someone who refuses to reject.

Your see, rejection breeds rejection. Our call is to break that cycle; to ask the God of second, third, infinite chances, to help us

see the other, however different, however offensive, as a fellow human being, trying alongside everyone else to work out this thing called life. And, we need to ask God to see what lies behind rejection. Usually, it's fear or insecurity of some kind or other. Like Jesus, there will, of course, be times when we have to walk away to protect ourselves, to shake off the hurt and projection that clings to us, to surround ourselves with those who accept us exactly as we are.

In rejecting Jesus that day, the people of his home town rejected life. They couldn't see beyond their prejudice and so they failed to witness miracles... miracles like forgiveness, reconciliation, healing.

In Jesus, I find someone painfully familiar with rejection; someone who understands its sting from personal experience. Just knowing that, helps more than I can say.

I love what the comedian Frank Skinner writes in his book, *A Comedian's Prayer Book*: 'One of the joys of prayer,' he says, 'is that you (God) get all of my references'.

Surely that's one of the most precious things; the fact that we never have to explain ourselves to God. He gets us; our fears, our insecurities, our buttons; the things we daren't tell anyone else. And He understands the pain we carry from rejection and the reasons we reject others. And yet, never, never, never does He reject us. So, may we learn to be more like that part of the family.



Mark 6. 1-12

A Prophet Without Honor

6 Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. ² When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.

“Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What’s this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing? ³ Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, ^[a] Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.

⁴ Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home.” ⁵ He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. ⁶ He was amazed at their lack of faith.

Jesus Sends Out the Twelve

Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village. ⁷ Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits.

⁸ These were his instructions: “Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. ⁹ Wear sandals but not an extra shirt. ¹⁰ Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. ¹¹ And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”

¹² They went out and preached that people should repent. ¹³ They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

2 Corinthians 12

² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. ³ And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—⁴ was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. ⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶ Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, ⁷ or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.