

Turning points (Mark 6:1-13)

We arrive at this morning's gospel reading from Chapter 6 of Mark's gospel with Jesus having completed a tremendously successful period - from his first appearance, things had been going well, calling his first disciples, proclaiming that the kingdom of God has drawn near, attracting crowds of followers, casting out demons and performing tremendous miracles – climaxing in bringing Jairus' daughter back from the dead, as we heard last week.

Verse one of chapter six tells us that Jesus returned to his hometown – Nazareth – and after the events of the first five chapters you might think that Jesus would have been welcomed home with celebration – local boy made good. But it seems that he wasn't.

It's likely that was due to the isolation of Nazareth – news didn't travel quickly, and news of what had happened in Capernaum and Gennesaret hadn't yet reached Nazareth.

We know that Jesus was no longer teaching in the synagogues in the north – it's likely he was no longer allowed to – and besides the crowds he was attracting were too large... so instead, Jesus has been teaching in the open, but on his return to Nazareth, Jesus began – on the Sabbath, no less – to teach in the synagogue there.

We read that those who were there were amazed. What Jesus would have done would have been to take a scroll of one of the Prophets – which makes up much of our Old Testament – and translate it from Hebrew into the day-to-day Aramaic language, giving a commentary on it and interpreting it for those present. It's likely he explained how the scriptures were being fulfilled and that the kingdom of God was at hand.

But the reaction of the people of Nazareth wasn't 'amazement' in a good sense: It seems the people in his hometown were amazed at his audacity and at his presumption. "Where did this man get these things?" they demanded. "What's this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing?" After all, he's only a carpenter – he's one of us.

Rather than testing what Jesus was saying against the scriptures, they judged him on who he was.

And I think that's something we have to be careful with today – rejecting what people say because of who they are. Rejecting what people say because or because they're a relatively "new" Christian or because they don't have a background 'like ours'. And indeed the reverse is also a problem; accepting what those in positions of authority say, rather than testing what it is they say. Just because someone is preaching in a church, for instance, doesn't mean what they say is right – we should be testing what is said against the scriptures.

It may be too, that the people rejected Jesus because he had started his ministry elsewhere, and come back home with his twelve disciples, none of whom were from Nazareth. Maybe they wondered why the local men weren't good enough?

Verse 5 tells us that Jesus could not do any miracles there, which seems very strange because it's never suggested anywhere else that Jesus' power was limited, but I think we need to go back to what the point of the miracles is: They are signs of who Jesus is. If the people have rejected him and don't recognise who he is, there is no point to performing miracles. Just like Pharaoh's heart was hardened to the signs from God in Moses' time, so it seems the hearts of the people of Nazareth have been hardened to the signs from Jesus.

But not quite no miracles at all, because in full, verse 5 says "He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them". Which is interesting: no miracles, but healings.

From the gospel accounts, Jesus was going out to preach about the kingdom of God and to cast out evil spirits. That was his mission. Jesus didn't go out to heal. The healings that we read about are miraculous, but they take place in response to needs which Jesus encounters.

Jesus never turns away from people in need. Even though he cannot do any miracles to convince people about who he is, he still responds to people who need healing.

We read that Jesus was amazed at the lack of faith of the people of Nazareth – the people had failed to see God's power in him – their prejudice against Jesus, for whatever reason, didn't allow them to understand who Jesus was.

It was a turning point in his ministry – and so Jesus' ministry, his proclamation of the kingdom of God, changed.

The disciples had been part of Jesus ministry from almost the beginning – he starts proclaiming the good news in verse 15 of Chapter one – "The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news", and in the next two verses he sees and calls his first disciples – Simon and Andrew: "Follow me" he says, "and I will make you fishers of men".

While the disciples have been with him for so long, it's in the next part of Chapter six that they take on a more active role. They go out to teach – to proclaim the gospel; and Jesus empowers them to do so – and he gives them authority over evil spirits.

Just as Jesus had been casting out evil spirits, now the disciples, as part of their mission, would be able to do the same. By sending out the twelve, Jesus both fulfils their original calling – to be fishers of men, but he also prepares them for the time when he won't be physically present with them anymore.

Jesus gave the twelve some pretty strict instructions – he sends them out two by two and tells them to take nothing but a staff; no bread, no bag, no money, don't take extra clothes, when you go into a town, stay in one place.

And of course, if they're rejected, then they're to shake the dust off their feet when they leave, as a testimony against those who reject the gospel.

Things had changed: After John the Baptist's initial preaching, the preaching of the kingdom of God had been carried out solely by Jesus. Now, instead of being the teacher, he also becomes the sender.

And he sends them two by two – which reflects Old Testament requirements in regard to court proceedings (Numbers 35:50, Deuteronomy 17:6). Two witnesses were needed to testify on serious matters, so sending them in pairs reinforces both the truth and the seriousness of the message.

In taking nothing with them, Jesus makes it clear they are to rely on God throughout their journey. They stay as guests with people who will receive them – they don't beg or work... and they certainly don't take.

As today's reading draws to a close, Mark gives us an idea of the ministry they conducted. They went out and preached that people should repent (6:12). Now, repentance doesn't always get much of a run in today's church: the focus is on God's grace and the need for people to come to God, through Jesus. But in order for people to come to God, we need to turn away from where we are.

As I often reflect, it's easy to see that things aren't right with the world: Watch TV, read a newspaper, think about the problems of our own families and our own communities. Things aren't right with the world – and just trying to make things better, trying to be better people, doesn't work. We - hopefully - are being transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit within each one of us, and by growing in the knowledge and the love of God. But in order for that transformation to happen, we must turn away from the ways of the world.

And that's what repentance is: Turning away. And if we go back to Chapter one, that's what John preached "...a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." (1:4) and that was the first thing Jesus preached, too "The time has come... the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news," he said (1:15)

The power that Jesus had given the Twelve worked – they drove out many demons, but they also anointed many sick people and healed them. Which may seem odd, because power of healing isn't specifically mentioned when Jesus commissions the disciples, and yet, that healing power is clearly present.

Once again, I think it's that the miraculous healings aren't the focus of the gospel or the mission of Jesus and now the disciples – rather they are a result of the kingdom of God drawing near, and the power of God breaking through against what's wrong.

So we have this account of Jesus sending out the twelve, to share the good news, and empowering them on their mission, but Mark doesn't tell us where they went or how long their mission journey was.

We can infer a bit, though: The historian Josephus notes there were just over 200 cities and villages in Galilee, and if the six pairs of disciples spent about a week in each, it

would have been about nine months – which is plausible and fits into the New Testament timelines.

We do know from later in chapter six though, that the people at the feeding of the five thousand (which is five thousand men, plus women and children), had all heard the message that the disciples had carried to the villages (6:33).

So Jesus' ministry – his proclamation of the kingdom of God – didn't fail when Jesus was rejected in his hometown. But it reached a turning point, and the ministry continued, centred on Jesus, empowered by Jesus, but now also carried out by the disciples.

There would of course be many more changes in the story of the spread of the gospel. There's Peter's realisation the Jesus is the messiah (8), the transfiguration (9), Jesus betrayal and suffering, Peter's denial, Jesus death and resurrection, his ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

But while things change, the good news always continues. We get to be part of carrying that good news forward today, but the good news going forward isn't dependant on what we do.

We experience turning points all the time. Often things don't go the way we expect or want or hope. In our own lives, in the lives of our families and friends, within our congregation, or within the broader church. Covid brought about massive changes for our worship and gathering, for instance. We couldn't meet together the way we wished we could. But we coped. We were still the people of God – the body of Christ – even though we were not meeting together.

And while Jesus hasn't specifically empowered us to cast out demons, he has empowered us with the Holy Spirit, and it is the Holy Spirit who dwells in us and empowers us to be witnesses of Jesus in the world. To carry the good news. But however we might do that, whatever that witness might look like, it is not simply dependant on our own efforts and our own resources. Once again, the spread of the gospel isn't dependant on us, but we are blessed to be part of it.

Whatever turning points we face, let us make sure we turn away from the ways of the world, turn to God, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, put our faith, our hope and our future in Jesus.

Amen.