

Mark 6:1-13

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Good morning everyone.

I want to start by saying I am honoured and delighted to stand here as your new curate! I had a chance to introduce myself several Sundays back, when I was licensed, so I won't say much about myself about now, except that my name's Michael and I live in Innsbruck, where I work as an academic, specialising in early church history. I've been an ordained minister for about three years, starting off in South Oxfordshire in England and now here. As I say, I'm honoured and excited to be serving here.

The second half of the Gospel reading is Jesus' instructions to the twelve as they begin a new chapter of their ministry, so you might think I could easily connect to it. But you don't have to spend much time on this passage to realise that this is a rather different kind of ministry to Patrick's or mine. There's the rather strange sounding mention of unclean spirits and demons, not perhaps the kind of characters we expect to turn up in Vienna in 2024. Then there's the rather Spartan rules about how much they can take with them: no bread, no bag, no money, and then, in v.9, no second tunic. They're not even allowed a change of clothes. It's rather different to this church's extensive and beautiful collection of vestments. And then there's the rather stark command to give no-one a second chance.

Verse 11: "If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them."

Surely, Jesus, some people can take their time to hear the word. God's not finished with people who say no to him once. Is he?

Demons, no supplies and no second chances.

It's a rather strange mission, isn't it? If I'm honest, I'm rather glad I'm not expecting my curacy here to be like this. Perhaps you're also glad this isn't my plan. After all, it would get a bit smelly if I only wore one shirt for all my time here.

The reason this all seems so strange is because I actually don't think this passage is intended as instructions for church leaders now. These disciples aren't a model of how church leaders should behave today.

Because when you start to look at this passage, one thing that jumps right out is how much these disciples are like Old Testament Israel. For a start, there's twelve of them, like the twelve tribes. They wander around with no external, material provision for their practical needs: no money, no food, no supplies. They just have to trust in God – exactly like Israel in the wilderness in the early books of the Old Testament. They relied on manna and quail from heaven. These disciples don't give a second chance to the people who rejected their message, just like OT Israel was starkly opposed by the nations around them as they travelled through the wilderness. This passage is Jesus commissioning his disciples to go and be Israel. It's the beginning of the new Israel, the church.

Why's this important? Well, the point about Israel in the Old Testament is that it's the people God calls to bless the rest of the world. Israel in the OT is God's instrument of healing and love and grace, to the hurting, broken world around it, which, again, is exactly what these disciples are called to do. They cast out demons and unclean spirits and, whatever that means or looks like today, however it relates to what we call mental illness, the point is these demons represent powers of darkness. They represent suffering and evil. The disciples are to cast them out, they're to be agents of light and healing and change. And the disciples are meant to heal diseases. Again, the point is not so much about whether or not and how, miraculous spiritual healing works today. I certainly would be honoured to pray for anyone here who's sick, but I don't pretend to have the power to cure sickness at will. The point is that the disciples are called to be agents of God's healing to a broken world. And finally, they teach. In v.12, "they proclaimed that all should repent", that everyone should adopt a new mindset, should change their thinking and their attitudes. The disciples bring healing, deliverance from evil and a message of hope and repentance.

That was the calling of Israel, the ancient people of God and Jesus is now saying that it's the calling of the new people of God, the church. Israel started with 12 tribes; the church starts with 12 people. And this all means that this passage is about the whole church, not just about its leaders. This passage is not telling me how to be a minister, useful though that would be. It's telling us all how to be the new people of God. It's telling us to go out and do God's work in a hurting world.

It's important that we do it in that hurting world. That's where the disciples are. There's a stark contrast with the first half of the passage. In the first half of the passage, Jesus returns to his home-town and his reception isn't good. It says in v.3 "they took offence at him." They don't believe him. They don't accept his message. And therefore, v.5:

"And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them."

*He could do no deed of power.* Not he didn't, he couldn't. They have such little faith. The people who were closest to Jesus, who had most opportunity to know him, who were most familiar with him, are those that do not recognise him. The reason seems to be that they are too familiar with him.

Verse 3: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" They've grown up with him; they've known him for years. So he can't be the son of God. You can almost imagine them saying:

"That's Jesus. You know, Mary's boy. The one who used to work in the carpenter's shop. He was in the same year at school as my son, Luke. He used to play in the football team with your Ruth. He can't be the son of God. He's just a local boy."

Familiarity with Jesus seems to breed contempt for Jesus. We're rarely impressed by what we already know. Instead we're hungry for the new. And that is a real challenge to those of us that have had a faith in Jesus for a relatively long time. Are we allowing ourselves to become indifferent to Jesus, because we have known him so long. Dare I say it, is he becoming boring? Well, if that resonates with you, perhaps part of the answer is to join the disciples on their mission. Among the people who are bored of him, Jesus can do no deed of power, but on mission, the disciples cast out many demons. This passage presents us with a choice. We can either be bored by Jesus, like his family in Nazareth, or we can serve with Jesus, like the disciples on their journey. And it is those who serve with Jesus who see him work miracles.

I don't know what that will look like for you. I don't know many of you very well yet. I hope I can get to know you better. We'll all serve in different ways. Some of us will help out with practical tasks; others will reach out and encourage the lonely and the struggling in our community; others will be servant-hearted administrators who work hard to organise and make things happen; others will pour ourselves into our families older and younger or honouring God in our work-places. All those things count. During my curacy here, I want to be part of that with you, to join with you in doing God's work. That's what I'm excited about in the years ahead. We'll do it as a team. I think that's why Jesus sends them out in pairs. They didn't go out on their own. Often it will be hard. I think that's why Jesus, on this particular occasion, dramatically cuts down what they're allowed to take with them, so that they'll know it won't be easy and they'll have to rely on God. But this is what the church is here for, this is what the church is. It's the people of God, reliant on God and doing the work of God, challenging evil, whether it's demonic or moral or political, or in any other form, healing disease, whether that means supporting and enabling practical, charitable efforts for health and material needs or just listening and loving to serve people's holistic health, and preaching repentance, that is sharing the wonderful story of God's love for the world in Jesus, so that minds and hearts, lives and actions are changed.

I so look forward to doing that with you.