

The Tongue Offends Not

Ezekiel 2:1-5 | Psalm 123 | 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 | Mark 6:1-13

MARK 6:1-13

¹ He left that place and came to his home town, and his disciples followed him. ² On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!' 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?' And they took offence at him. ⁴ Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.' ⁵ And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶ And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷ He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸ He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹ but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰ He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. 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.' ¹² So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³ They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

INTRODUCTION

We will begin with the most English of poets: Shakespeare, and his history of King Henry IV, Part 2. The story picks up with Lord Bardolph having arrived at the house of the Earl of Northumberland with good news from Shrewsbury. King Henry has been wounded. The conspiracy to overthrow Henry is succeeding and the battle, being led by Northumberland's son, is being won. But just then, a second messenger arrives. Bardolph had it backwards. Henry's forces have prevailed, and the rebellion has lost. And then, a third messenger arrives and confirms the bad news. To make it worse, he must convey the hardest message of all: Northumberland's son, has been killed. Northumberland, not yet knowing this tragic news, beckons the messenger:

I see a strange confession in thine eye—
 Thou shak'st thy head, and hold'st it fear or sin
 To speak a truth. If he be slain, say so.
 The tongue offends not that reports his death;
 And he doth sin that doth belie the dead,
 Not he which says the dead is not alive.
 Yet the first bringer of unwelcome news too
 Hath but a losing office, and his tongue
 Sounds ever after as a sullen bell
 Remembered knolling a departing friend.¹

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Second Part of Henry the Fourth*, 1.1.94-103. See *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Second Edition; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 540.

These words, spoken by Northumberland, acknowledge the difficulty of being a courier with important, but potentially devastating news. “Yet the first bringer of unwelcome news too hath but a losing office and his tongue sounds ever after as a sullen bell.” Northumberland vows to avoid an unreasonable, yet very common, response, to hold the tragedy of the message, against the messenger. It’s not easy to be a messenger with bad news. From the fourth estate media reporting on politicians or scientists trying to warn us about the state of our world, we have a news-hungry people—analysing every tweet for information—ready to pounce. And in such an environment, it is hard to be the bearer ill tidings, giving rise to clichés like ‘don’t shoot the messenger.’ This idea, the inescapable challenge of being a messenger with an unpopular message, is at the centre of our Gospel reading. Being a messenger is no easy task. And yet, Mark would have us know: Some messages are worth the cost of bearing. Let’s take a look.

1. THE TASK... IS UNATTRACTIVE

The task is unattractive. Mark tells us, in verse 1, that Jesus has returned to his hometown. This is already suggestive if you’ve been reading along because a few chapters back, Jesus had an encounter with some people from his hometown: his family.² It did not go well. They came to tell him how crazy he was. But here he is again, showing compassion in trying to bring his gospel message to the people of Nazareth.³ And once again, it was a less-than-ideal homecoming. They express scepticism and an assumption of insignificance. ‘Oh, isn’t this the carpenter?’ Not only were they dismissive, but they also took offence. Apparently, his message struck a nerve. Even Jesus acknowledges that the social boundaries have been transgressed with his proverbial statement: “*Prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown...*” He later acknowledges that this kind of reception is to be expected when he tells the apostles that they will also be met with something less than welcome.

2. THE TASK... IS URGENT

The task is unattractive, and it is also urgent. Jesus makes this point in his commissioning of the twelve apostles. He tells them to take nothing but a staff, a belt, sandals, and a single tunic. These four particular items suggest a connection back to the Exodus, when the Israelites were told to put on their belts and sandals and take their staffs as they hurriedly left Egypt to escape slavery.⁴ The mode here is one of haste. ‘Do not get bogged down by carrying extra luggage or even wearing a second tunic.’ The point is: ‘Go. And go quickly.’ Jesus is equally unconcerned and unsentimental about the prospect of being turned away. ‘If they refuse to hear you, shake the dust off your feet as you go.’ In other words: ‘Keep going. The task is large, and the task is urgent, don’t get delayed by unwelcoming people.’ The emphasis here is on the urgency. The gospel message of the kingdom is *so* important, it must be shared.

3. THE TASK... IS UNSAFE

The task is not only unattractive and urgent, but also unsafe. You might be thinking: ‘Well, this doesn’t seem that bad. So, these people weren’t nice to them? So what?’ Remember what Jesus said about a prophet in his hometown. Consider, for a moment, how the prophets were treated.

² Mark 3:31-35.

³ It’s worth noting that Mark does not actually mention the name of the town as Nazareth. It is an interpretive assumption that this is the town being referenced. Mark is aware that Jesus came from Nazareth (see Mark 1:9) and Matthew affirms as much (see Matthew 2:23).

⁴ Exod 12:11.

Isaiah, in his calling, was told of devastating rejection.⁵ Jeremiah, for proclaiming his message, was cursed, beaten, and thrown in prison.⁶ Elijah was hunted by King Ahab and Jezebel—who had already killed scores of prophets.⁷ Nehemiah, later, recognized how they'd historically killed their prophets.⁸ Even later, the author of Hebrews, referring to the prophets said, and I quote: *"They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented."*⁹ And even right here in Mark's Gospel, the very next passage tells us how the last of the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, was decapitated for his message.¹⁰ And make no mistake, this is where the story of Mark's Gospel is going. It is the gospel message. Jesus Christ, for his message, will later hang on a tree in Golgotha, beaten, tortured, crucified.

4. THE TASK... IS UPON US.

And at this point, you might be wondering: 'Is it worth it? This message is unattractive, yet urgent, and conveying it is unsafe. What is this message, and can it possibly be worth it?' My answer is yes, yes, it is. The message is the same message that Jesus has been proclaiming from the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark, so helpfully described in chapter 1: *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*¹¹ Notice the connections here. Believe in the good news, faith—this is precisely what Jesus found lacking in his hometown.¹² Repentance—this is the message the apostles proclaimed.¹³ And the message is one of salvation, that despite our sinfulness, our evil thoughts and deeds and rebellion against God, that salvation is available to us through faith, through repentance. This message has always challenged people—we'd rather violently reject the messenger, than admit our own sin. We'd rather put the message—even though it is a message of hope—out of our minds, rather than own and confess and repent of our mistakes, our sins. Well, at the risk of being a prophet rejected in his adopted hometown—you need to know that you (and I) are sinners. We need this message as much as anyone. We need to repent and believe as much as anyone. And please hear me on this, I don't say that to bully you. Our culture, I fear, is too quickly moving toward a place where people are unable to feel shame or regret, to own mistakes and repent in a meaningful way. We're only ever allowed to feel good, to be affirmed—never to be challenged. Well—hear this unpopular message. You and I are sinners in need of a Saviour. We need to repent. And I pray that, as we move toward the table in the coming minutes, you and I can do just that. Jesus Christ died, not just for the message, but for our sins. And in that, we have hope.

Of course, you might be thinking that you already believe this. Good. Now be a messenger. Over and over again, in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus shows us the way. He does something and then challenges his followers to do the same. He bears this message, despite the cost. And then he sends out the 70 to do the same. And as Christians, we are to do the same. The Christian faith

⁵ Isa 6:9-13.

⁶ See Jer 15:10, 20:1-3, and 32:2-3.

⁷ 1 Kgs 19:1-2. Cf. 1 Kgs 18:1-4.

⁸ Neh 9:26.

⁹ Heb 11:37.

¹⁰ Mark 6:14-29.

¹¹ Mark 1:14-15.

¹² Mark 6:6.

¹³ Mark 6:12.

has affirmed this at every point. Not just professional ministers, but all believers, all who follow Jesus, are to be ready to share the good news.¹⁴

This should not be surprising to any Christian who has ever thought about engaging in evangelism. Sharing the gospel, the hope you have as a Christian, is very much seen as an impolite imposition in our day. It is very much seen as a transgression of social boundaries. And in many places, it is not just a social transgression, it is a violation of company policy or the rules of professionalism. Yet, Jesus understood this and proclaimed the message of the gospel anyway. The apostles were ready to meet with failure, and still went out on mission. And so, we should also. But it is always an intense internal wrestling match. In fact, I have had many loved ones, not to mention friends, co-workers, and fellow students over the years who I know, deep down, needed and still need to hear the message of the gospel. Have I always shared, regardless of the probability of failure? Have I been willing to risk it in the face of social boundaries? Not always. But I wish I had.

CONCLUSION

As I draw to a close, I think about the things I've glossed over in the passage. There's always more to say in these sermons, including how lacking in expertise the messengers are, and how high are the stakes of sharing the gospel. But for now, I want to end with this: It is worth sharing the gospel. Jesus is no idealist, and neither is Mark. They know it is an unattractive task, likely to be met with disdain. They know it is an urgent task, likely to be met with rejection. They know it is an unsafe task, undoubtedly met with great cost. And yet, the task is worth doing, the cost is worth bearing. The gospel is worth proclaiming. Because like that messenger in Shakespeare's *Henry the Fourth*, we have a message about a son who died that is worth hearing.¹⁵

Let's pray. *Heavenly Father, thank you for sending us your Son, our Saviour, that we might be reconciled to you. Help us to believe, to repent, and to make him known, to be lights in the darkness of our world. We ask this in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹⁴ Evangelism, the sharing of the gospel of Jesus Christ with others, is a defining characteristic of the Christian. This is clearly seen throughout the New Testament's treatment of it in both explicit and implicit terms. For example, see 1 Peter 3:15, Matthew 28:19-20, Matthew 5:13-16, Romans 10:14-17, Acts 1:8, or 1 Peter 2:9. The underlying notion that God must be made known is also presented as essential in the Old Testament. See Psalm 105:1, Isaiah 12:4, and several other similar passages. Our Church believes this. The fourth of the four signposts in *The Anglican Way*, a document describing the "the teaching of Anglican identity, life and practice," is that we are to be "directed by God's mission." The second point of our Diocesan strategy is to "share in the evangelization of Europe." Our own mission statement here at Christ Church invites us to "participate in God's mission to the world."

¹⁵ We end each Eucharistic service with a prayer following communion. Perhaps you have noticed, both make a request of God to send us out on mission. In the words of the second: "May we who share Christ's body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world." The Archbishop's Council 2000, *Common Worship* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 182.