



7th July 2024
Mark 6.1-13

Responding to Sermons

Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds. In Jesus' name. Amen.

It was a highlight for me during a visit to Washington, to stand on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and think about that summer afternoon, on 28th August 1963 during the heady days of the Civil Rights campaign, as a quarter of a million gathered around the Reflecting Pool at the end of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Dr Martin Luther King, a Baptist Minister from the deep South, was to give the address, which sounded much more like a sermon.

Towards the end the gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson, shouted out from the crowd *Tell them about the Dream Martin*.

So he did. He went *off-piste*. This, the most remembered part of what he said that day was never in his original text. It was improvised.

The next day the Boston Globe reported Dr King had *caught the mood*. The Washington Post wrote *the speech rose above mere oratory*. Yet in a memo from the FBI director King was described as *a subversive, and we must mark him as the most dangerous man for the future of our nation*.

I wonder what my reaction might have been if I had been there that day? What would you have felt as you heard his words?

Because speeches and sermons are never complete in themselves, they always demand a response.

All of this probably begs the question *What are sermons for?*
Answers on a postcard!

All of us who preach them know of the response at the door: *Nice sermon vicar...or...nice talk minister.* And we are truly grateful such such encouragements.

It's been said of art, or newspapers as well as of sermons that they are at their best when they *Disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturb.* Which, in truth, really lifts the bar and makes them quite a challenge.

Because it's probably true that the greatest enemy of any sermon is indifference. If it provokes nothing more than sleep (don't look up at this point, I have written here) or mild acquiescence, perhaps we have all been wasting our time.

Of course, that's exactly what didn't happen in this morning's gospel. Indifference is the opposite of the reaction given to our Lord as he preached back at his home Synagogue of Nazareth one Sabbath. Mark even tones it down because in other accounts Jesus was threatened physically because of what he said.

He made an impression. But not one that would have encouraged the Synagogue leaders to ask him back any time soon.

All of this seems like a disastrous start to the mission of Jesus. Getting booted off stage in your hometown wouldn't today be deemed as the most auspicious beginning to any tour or campaign.

Mark's account is expanded for us with extra details in Luke 4. It paints a fuller picture of Jesus participating in the Synagogue liturgy, reading from the scroll standing, preaching from Isaiah sitting.

Yet both accounts are unanimous in documenting the bad reception his sermon received. It didn't even get a seven.

Maybe his background had something to do with it. They still viewed him as a carpenter. The word used is actually more that of a joiner than a craftsman. And then there's that hurtful dig about his parentage and being the son of Mary. Maybe the gossip around his birth still lingered and defined the family. It certainly infantilised him. He really wasn't given the honour usually offered a visiting Rabbi, one who came with apprenticed disciples. He was still viewed as the youngster who lived two streets away.

I wonder too about how good the congregation at Nazareth were in really hearing what was being said that day. And it's not just a question for them but also for us.

Luke tells us Jesus read, probably from the prescribed passage for the day, from Isaiah. Now, for most this surely wouldn't have been the first time in hearing these ancient and much-loved words. Isaiah's writings would have been well known and even cherished. Indeed, the hearers might have become over familiar with them. That is, they heard them again and again and had gotten far too comfortable with them. They felt they knew what they meant.

So, how challenging to have the joiner, Mary's son, breeze into town and preach that Isaiah's words were to be fulfilled now, in his mission and ministry. Suddenly the words were no longer just sitting on the page offering ambiguous comfort, Jesus lifted them from scroll and took them as his action plan. They went from passive text to active mission and that felt disturbingly uncomfortable.

And maybe it can often be like that for us. We can become so over familiar with scripture that we fail to be truly challenged by it. It soothes but does it activate?

This is why it's sometimes so helpful to hear scripture in a different

context from church services. In church, accompanied by the beauty of the liturgy and music we might become dulled to the radical teaching of scripture. Yet hear the words of Jesus spoken on stage in a drama, on the screen in a film, or maybe at Oberammergau in a Passion Play and they come alive and are heard with new challenge and a fresh clarity. Perhaps even with a deserving rawness that they sometimes lack in a church.

There is a great deal of difference between simply hearing and truly listening.

One phrase much remembered and often quoted from today's Gospel narrative is the idea that a Prophet is without honour in his own country. The closer we are to home the more difficult it may be to be heard. It is equally true that history has a perverse habit of reversing its view concerning change maker prophets. They are frequently in the advanced guard with the rest of us catching up.

Nelson Mandella was once viewed as the world's number one terrorist. How ironic that he ended up being the guest of honour of Queens and Presidents the world over.

Only last month I did a little talk at LunchBreak about John Bunyan, the tinker come preacher who ministered not far from here at Bedford. In the mid 1600's he spent 12 years in that town's gaol because he preached in other places than the Parish Church. Yet he spent his time well writing Pilgrim's Progress and today he has memorial windows in both Westminster Abbey and Southwark Cathedral.

Or, even closer to home what about the Amersham Martyrs. Men and women who trailblazed a love of scripture and reading it in the vernacular. And for that crime of personal bible reading in the early 1500's were burnt at the stake. The likes of Thomas Barnard and Joan Norman, and William Tylesworth whose daughter was forced the light the fire. Today we honour these outliers who led where others eventually followed. Prophets, without honour in their own

country.

Well, I suppose a follow up story could have be told about what the synagogue worshippers of Nazareth made of Jesus in his following years of mission – but it was never written.

Perhaps I could end my sermon today with a return to Washington. During our Manse Exchange there we visited its Cathedral on St Alban's Hill overlooking the city and I occasionally tune in to its webcast services.

I did exactly that on the Sunday after the tragic shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012 when 20 children and 6 teachers so tragically lost their lives.

The Dean of the Cathedral was on duty that Sunday and preached a passionate sermon about the need for gun control legislation. A courageous man whose words of challenge rang out from the pulpit amidst the tears and heartbreak of that week's news. How would his message be received? Was it too political? Too raw? After he said his final amen there was that moment of silence before a ripple of applause welled up through the nave and one worshipper after another rose to their feet to honour their dean's integrity and courage. The surprise on his face was palpable – and so was the sense of heart to heart connection he had made between pulpit and pew that morning.

What a difference between Washington and Nazareth.

Every sermon, whether in cathedral, church or mission hall, calls for a response. A response that says, we will act on these words, respond to this challenge so that the words we have sung and heard in worship will be the ones that motivate and inspire us in service.

May it be so in both our churches in the name of Jesus, The Word made flesh and the Word who spoke among us. Amen.

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Ian Green, Amersham, 1st July 2024