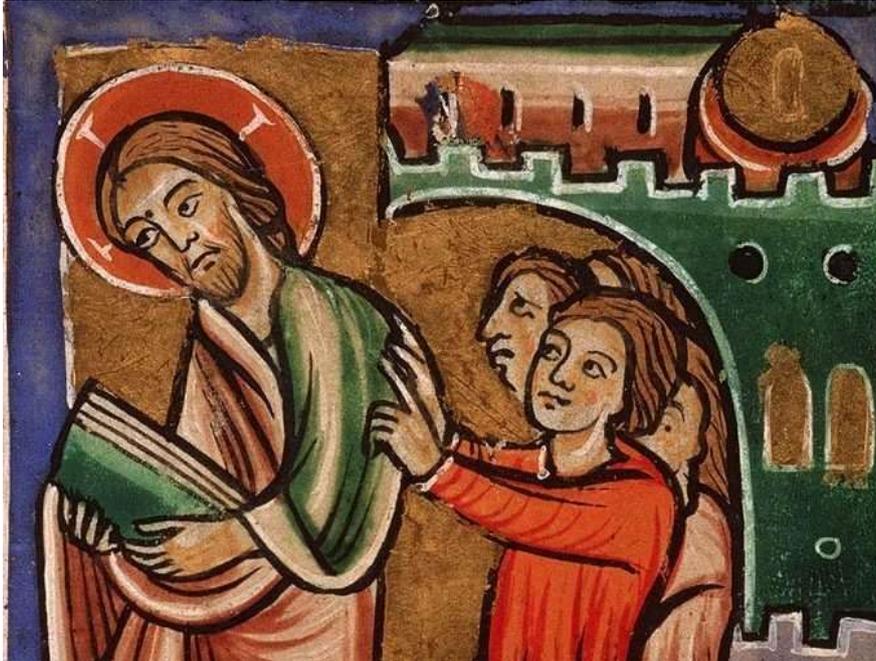


Sermon Preached at St Mary's Ballina
4th Sunday After Epiphany
30 January 2022

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How to become unpopular on your home ground.

Purchase a new remote for the garage door because the one in your car isn't working.

Come home and program the new remote to sync with the garage door. Be rather proud of yourself because instead of following the 10 step process in the manual, you seem to be able to do it in about 3 steps without reading the instructions.

Then go out for the rest of the day.

When you come home, find that the cars that are normally in the garage are parked outside.

Think that this is odd.

When you go inside, discover that your wife and daughter, who normally park in the garage, are parked outside, because their garage remotes no longer work. And they're not very happy about it.

Then reprogram all garage door remotes, one by one, following exactly the 10 step process in the manual, while supervised and observed by the whole family.

(needless to say this was my recent experience).

At least I was in good company. “No prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown” ... the ministry of Elijah and Elisha (according to Jesus in today’s Gospel) was limited in its effectiveness in their home territory. Either through not being effective (in the case of Elisha) or simply not being called upon (in the case of Elijah). Jesus himself was driven out of his hometown.

It makes difficult reading to hear that Jesus’ mission and his passion for social justice was not embraced and celebrated in his community.

At first it was: verse 22, “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came out of his mouth”.

But then they had a chance to think about it; about the implications of this dangerous message of liberation and justice, and they drove him out of town (*in Mark’s version 6:1-13 the verb ‘to take offence’, skandalizo, is used at v.3. Paul’s preaching of Christ crucified is a skandalon to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks 1 Cor 1:23*).

As I read this passage once again a couple of weeks ago in preparation for today my mind turned to the experience of the church in Australian society today. In many ways ours is an experience of not being well received. Of being not as well supported as the church once was. At best seen as irrelevant and or just ignored. Not trusted or respected. At worst, actively criticised and maligned.

This is a discouraging environment in which to minister. We’re in danger of losing our self-confidence, think that we don’t have any agency, and worse still, question our mission and purpose.

From our Australian context at the moment, you might well say then, does this message of liberation and justice in today’s Gospel really matter, because do people even want to know anything about the Christian faith?

But don’t be disillusioned. It’s easy to fall victim to what the media or various ardent secularists would have us believe.

In 2019 a research team* surveyed thousands of Australians who were not connected to the church at all and found that 41% of Australians believe that religion is good for society (36% were unsure but only 23% believed that religion wasn’t good for society).

91% of Australians know at least one Christian. So being a Christian is important. You are probably that one Christian that someone knows! Of those people who know a Christian, 41% think that they are caring, 35% think they're loving, and so on.

Up to 57% of Australians surveyed believed (and I quote) that "*Jesus was a real person who actually lived*"! That's pretty good! We can work with that.

One of the most interesting and encouraging results was about local churches in suburbs, towns and neighbourhoods. About 44% of people know their local church either slightly, moderately or extremely well. So they know we exist!

Also in relation to their local church, about 44% felt that the impact of their local church was a positive one.

These findings give me a lot of encouragement that there are people out there in Australian society who believe that Jesus was a real person, that Christianity is a good thing and has a positive role to play in the community.

When I go about my duties as Bishop either in the Diocese or in other parts of the country, people often ask me "what's it like being a Bishop?" "What's it like being Bishop of Grafton?" "How do you like your job?" School children often like asking me these questions.

I like to be honest. There are lots of aspects of my job that you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy.

But I'm also a positive person and like to focus on things that I can be grateful for. One of the things I like most about my work as bishop is people. I like visiting parishes, schools, Anglicare and celebrating with people. Hearing their stories, and affirming and encouraging people in their ministry.

What I do notice though is that some churches seem to believe that they have something to offer, something to share and that newcomers or visitors might want to be a part of their church community.

In other churches though there is a palpable feeling of resignation, of disillusionment. They seem to assume that no-one would be interested in being part of their community.

Let's be inspired by Jesus' passion for his mission despite the opposition that he expected.

Let's take courage from our first reading today, Jeremiah 1:4-10. Jeremiah was reminded by God that God had formed him in the womb, knew him before he was born, consecrated him and sent him.

God knew and affirmed Jeremiah intimately – the image of God's glory was in Jeremiah – may God perfect in you and I also, this image of God.

And we can take courage from the I Corinthians reading also (1 Cor 13:1-13). According to Paul, everything is possible in and through the love which comes ultimately from God.

Love is patient, kind, is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude, it rejoices not in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It believes all things, hopes all things, bears all things, endures all things. So love is the most passionate and powerful thing! Why would we want to do anything except out of this love? It helps us hope, believe, bear and endure.

We have this Christian message of liberation, salvation and justice – about which Jesus spoke so passionately in the synagogue at Nazareth – with gentle and respectful confidence may we too offer this message to those around us, yet offer it from love.

Almighty Father, in your redeeming love you have drawn us together into this community of love and service. Deepen our love for you, we pray, and grant us respectful confidence to preach your Gospel. By our faithfulness in prayer and through the quality of our common life, others may be drawn towards your truth and discover your joy in their lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayer from *The Canterbury Book of New Parish Prayers*, Max Kramer, 2020.

* Research by NCLS and McCrindle. faithandbelief.com.au