

Resolute trust in the face of rejection – A Homily for Trinity V

Ezekiel 2.1–5

Mark 6.1–13

People can surprise us no end. A person we have seen day in and day out over the years, whom we think we have the measure of, can suddenly take our breath away. One of the joys of being Curate here at All Saints is the number of times I have had my breath taken away by many of the people I meet, by many of you. Usually this takes place in more intimate settings outside our public gatherings and social interactions. I experience this, for instance, when I take communion to people in their homes. As I light the candles, and lay out the crucifix, corporal and the pyx containing the sacrament, there is a palpable shift in atmosphere. I'm with someone who has opened their heart to God. There's a stillness, a solemnity, a joy into which I have been invited. Though I may have brought the sacrament, the hospitality comes from the other. It is as if I have been welcomed into that private place where Jesus tells us to pray to our Father who hears in secret. And when the other person prays it is like nothing I've heard. Spirit in mortal flesh, as Ezekiel says. Poetry. Wisdom. Honesty. Humility. Perseverance. Joy. Faith. These abound. It is like someone we have only ever heard speak in hushed tones, breaking out in a ballad in which every ounce of their personality, life, humanity sings.

As with those who heard Jesus teach in the synagogue in today's Gospel, I am astounded by this. Where did this person get this? What is this wisdom? These are moments of impossible gratitude at the miracle of another person radiant with the glory of God. And yet they can be tinged by sorrow.

How so? Well, how often do we actually encourage each other in this kind of openness to God? How often do we marvel at how God's wisdom speaks through those we know? How often do we allow the eyes of our hearts to see the glory shining in another's face? On the contrary, are we not prone to react like those who heard Jesus speak in the synagogue and took offence? Do we not knock others down and refuse to believe that God speaks through these mere mortals? Do we not realise that there are prophets in our midst? Like Jesus, we should be amazed at our unbelief.

This is arguably one of the more devastating effects of the lack of belief in our own times. Not so much that people refuse to believe in God or Jesus Christ, but that because of the lack of belief in the God of Jesus Christ we refuse to believe in the dignity of other people.

In this context, it is a sad truth that the Church, rather than helping us discover the capacity of others to take our breath away, often encourages the opposite. Gathering together in the name of God within an institutional setting with its established culture and cliques can bring out the worst in us. As C.S Lewis has his demons say in his

book *The Screwtape Letters*, one of the great allies in their demonic cause is the church made up of all those neighbours of ours we would rather avoid. It matters little if the person next to us is someone of profound prayer and rare wisdom, we take offence at by the pettiest of things – their face, their singing out of tune, the clothes they wear. All this can easily be left unchallenged, even embellished, by the distance afforded by institutional religion.

In the Gospel, Jesus is on the receiving end of such institutionalised contempt. And it breaks his heart, as it would later crucify him. The very people he knows and who know him, people he wants to shine like the sun, amaze him by their lack of faith. But Jesus does not dwell on their rejection. He resolutely refuses to reject humanity tit for tat. Instead, he doubles down on his faith in the transformative power of interpersonal relationships and trust even at the risk of further injury and rejection.

Jesus does this in two ways. Firstly, he sends out his apostles in pairs, with next to nothing, giving them authority over unclean spirits. In modern parlance, we might understand this as authority over all that would maim human dignity and freedom. But the apostles' authority derives not only from Jesus but from their being dispatched in twos. As all of us know, it can be deeply challenging to be paired with another person in this way but it can also lead to deep genuine growth through mutual knowledge that overcomes misunderstanding and

prejudice. The apostles, and we with them, can only proclaim the Good News of God's unfailing belief in humanity by learning to believe in each other. We must be transformed by the mutual trust we place in each other for Christ's sake.

Secondly, Jesus announces the apostles are to be dependent on nothing but the kindness of strangers who invite them into their homes. It is not just that the apostles bring words of life to others, but they can do so only if they receive hospitality from others and so experience first-hand the redemptive truth of Jesus' faith in humanity. Indeed, it is often those who have themselves been rejected that offer hospitality to others and so bear witness to the saving power of trust.

Though prophets may not be welcome in their hometown, the prophetic calling to declare the God-given dignity of humanity amid injustice finds its home in interpersonal encounter, mutual trust and hospitality. We are all called to live this out in the way we extend hospitality to others, especially those who have been rejected. It must be the lifeblood of our parish, our outreach, our music, our café and development projects. This is how we transform the Church from being a dehumanising institution into God's life-giving temple where we human beings can be truly at home and celebrate each other's dignity and gifts. Such transformative communion lies at the heart of our Eucharistic worship. In the Eucharist, Christ calls us home but only by becoming dependent on us, by handing himself over in bread and

wine, so that we may either reject him or welcome him and allow him to work through us. And we only truly welcome Christ when we welcome others as Christ does, especially the despised and outcast.

Whenever we gather then let us be a Eucharistic people bound together in transformative relationships, mutual trust and hospitality. Like the first apostles, let us bear witness to God's undying faith in the value of each person amid a society suspicious or disinterested in faith, and a Church caught up in its narrow institutional concerns. It is by having our breath continually taken away by people we get to know and rely on that we cast out the demons of rejection and heal the bonds between humans to the glory of God revealed in Jesus Christ.