

The Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

Mark 6:1-13

July 4, 2021

“And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. And he marveled because of their unbelief.”

Mark 6:5-6



Bad Answers to a Good Question

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In our Gospel reading today from St. Mark chapter six we see that Jesus is the victim of what today we would call cancel culture. What we mean by that in today's society is simply feelings-based ostracism, a high-tech shunning of people based on whether someone has taken offence by another person's language or behaviour. I say this a "high-tech form" of ostracism because it almost always is driven by social media. In the world of Facebook and Twitter and Instagram the only thing that really matters is the feelings of the individual.

Guess what? This is not new, it's just that the tools to make it happen are new, and the name is new. Witness the reaction to Jesus when He returns to Nazareth, His home town, to preach in the synagogue. They hear Him preach, and like many they

are astonished at what He says, for Jesus does not bring the same stories about how God is going to do something some day for his people, but Jesus is standing there as the One who actually accomplishing God's plan of salvation for them, in their presence. But unlike many who move from astonishment or surprise to repentance and belief and faith, those gathered together in the home town synagogue move from astonishment to incredulity to this: "And they took offense at him."¹

They were scandalized to even be in His presence. They do seem to recognize that He is doing amazing things, even miracles, saying, "How are such mighty works done by his hands?"² But they don't like what they see, because He is challenging what they think Jesus ought to be, His place in society, what He should be saying and doing. And so Jesus says, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household."³ Let us put this in modern speech: a prophet is likely to be cancelled in his hometown, among his relatives, even in his own household, if someone has their feelings about him challenged. Then St. Mark gives us the part that really has us sit up and take notice: "⁵ And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. ⁶ And he marveled because of their unbelief."⁴ Hearing this perhaps you have questions. I sure do. To start, how is it possible that Jesus is unable do mighty works there? St. Mark's text is abundantly clear – he doesn't say that Jesus was not willing, or that He was too busy, or that He was distracted with other miracles in other

1 Mk 6:3.

2 Mk 6:2.

3 Mk 6:4.

4 Mk 6:5–6.

places. No, “he could do no mighty work there.”⁵ He was not able. If Jesus is truly God and man in one Person then surely He can do whatever He wants when He wants where He wants, right? Mark has shown us Jesus can heal the sick, calm a storm (which we heard of two weeks ago), and cast out demons. In fact, just last week we learned of how Jesus was so filled with healing power that it flowed from Him, and a woman who touched His garment was healed, and even further, that He was able to raise the daughter of Jairus from the dead. Yet, after all of this, Mark tells us Jesus was, “not able to do any miracle.” Why not?

There are a few bad answers to that very good question. Let’s start with this one: Jesus would not do miracles in Nazareth because God was judging the people. In other words, withholding His mighty works from the people was payback for their unbelief. Jesus has just taught them in the synagogue, and still they develop this skepticism to the point of actually taking offence at the Saviour. But is this how God works? Today many people live with this burden, that God is somehow judging them for their sins, that He is withholding something from them that they would otherwise be able to receive if somehow they were a better person. Then, when someone prays for physical healing and doesn’t receive it, they wonder, “Is God judging me for my sin?”

While this might seem like a good answer, it does not match the mission and ministry of Jesus. Truly we do live in a sinful and broken world in which “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by

⁵ Mk 6:5.

their unrighteousness suppress the truth.”⁶ Those with a hard and impenitent heart are indeed “storing up wrath for...on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.”⁷ But St. Mark tells us why Jesus has come in his very first sentence: “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”⁸ The key word there is “Gospel,” the Good News of the Kingdom of God which has appeared now for everyone. While John the Baptizer thought Jesus would come with an axe and fire to destroy all sinners, Jesus comes with water and Words which bring salvation instead. In fact, the mission of Jesus is to take God’s judgment upon Himself so all people might be saved. On the last day, when He returns in judgment, Jesus will condemn those who do not believe. But until that time, He is on a mission – a mission of mercy. He has come to save. People will question Him, misunderstand Him, even resist Him and try to “cancel” Him, but He will not stop until He has taken God’s judgment upon Himself and opened God’s Kingdom to all. So, the answer to the question, “why can’t Jesus perform miracles there” is not because God is judging these people.

If not judgement, then perhaps it is because the people lack faith. Again, this turns out to be a bad answer to a good question. St. Mark does indeed tell us that Jesus “marveled because of their unbelief.”⁹ But does this mean that if only they had faith that He would have done more? This answer still circulates widely in certain Christian circles. Watch any number of famous faith healers and preachers of a “prosperity

⁶ Ro 1:18.

⁷ Ro 2:5.

⁸ Mk 1:1.

⁹ Mk 6:6.

gospel” (which is not the Gospel at all) and you will hear variations on this idea, that God gives to you in proportion to your faith. Are you ill, or poor, or unemployed, or faced with any number of life challenges? Pray, and God will sort it out for you – if you have enough faith. According to this way of thinking God withholds his good gifts from those who approach him with wavering hearts, those who worry and fear and have doubts. God wants to do nice things, but if you don’t have enough faith, if you don’t have your spiritual act together, then you are getting in God’s way.

Listening to these false teachers someone suffering from cancer or dealing with hardship might suffer something much worse: a spiritual crisis. A person in need might begin to think that God is not healing them or fixing their problem because they don’t have faith. And if they don’t have faith, then perhaps they are not even a Christian, and their eternal salvation is in jeopardy.

Let’s be clear. God does not need your faith to perform his mighty works. Did God part the Red Sea and lead the people into the promised land because they had enough faith? Did Jesus feed the 5,000 with an endless supply of bread and fish because they had enough faith? Was it the faith of the disciples that enabled Jesus to calm the storm, or to walk on water? Was it because you had enough faith that Jesus was raised from the dead? In fact, on the last day, when Jesus raises the dead, who will be raised? Everyone; those who believe and those who do not believe. Who is it that receive the miraculous body and blood of our Lord at the altar of Holy Communion? Everyone who takes those elements into their mouth – for those who have faith, these gifts are received unto the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, but to those who

lack faith, unto their damnation. God is able to raise all people, and God is able to be present bodily in the Sacrament, because God does not need our faith to perform miracles. But by faith we grab hold of what he had done and continues to do for us. Our faith (or lack thereof) does not impede the Creator of the universe in carrying out his will.

So we have looked at two bad answers. If Jesus is not judging the people for their lack of faith, and if Jesus does not need faith to perform a miracle, why was Jesus unable to work miracles in Nazareth? Perhaps we need to speak about this in terms of His mission. Jesus has come to bring salvation to all people, not judgment. While miracles are not a reward for believing, they actually can lead to punishment for those who do not believe. We see this in St. Mark, when Jesus condemns the Pharisees who seek a sign from heaven. Jesus says, ““Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation..”¹⁰ You see, they wanted to Jesus to perform something not because that would change their mind about Him, but they want Jesus to make something happen on their own terms. They reject the signs they have already seen, and so Jesus cannot meet their demands. For those who have seen signs and yet still not believed – like the Pharisees, and like those gathered in Nazareth – there is condemnation. In St. Matthew Jesus says, “Woe to you...Capernaum...For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”¹¹

10 Mk 8:12.

11 Mt 11:21–24.

For Jesus to perform miracles in the face of unbelief would only increase God's condemnation on the Day of Judgment. Jesus has just preached in His hometown and the people have resisted the Spirit's work through that word. To do miracles in the face of such resistance would only increase God's judgment. By the way, it's the same thing with the Sacrament of the Altar, which I already mentioned. To receive the miraculous sacramental presence of our Lord under the bread and wine without faith, without a proper understanding of what it is and what it is for, or in a state of unrepentant sin, only serves to confirm unbelief and resistance. The Christian church therefore carefully guards who can receive the blessed Sacrament, not out of some sense of exclusivity, but in order to avoid harming those who are not worthy of its reception.

Jesus is on a mission of grace, not of judgement. Then and now. A bruised reed, He will not break. A smouldering wick, He will not snuff out. Jesus has been sent by His Father to bring Good News. He has been sent by the Father to suffer and die on the cross, taking upon Himself the sins of the whole world. He has come to save. He fulfills this office. We hear how He sent His disciples out to share that same Good News, two by two, even though they only had as of yet an imperfect idea of the Kingdom of God. The message is Jesus, then and now. In His death and resurrection, He is Good News for all. The message does not change regardless of how the world responds, because the mission is not dependent on how the world responds. To an unbelieving world there can never be enough proof, enough signs, enough miracles, because Jesus is an offence. The Gospel remains an object that the world would try to

cancel. All the same, Jesus will respond in love. He continues to pour out the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament in order that faith would be sparked and nurtured. Sometimes with signs and miracle, but usually without, Jesus brings the self-sacrificing love that brings God's embrace, and the promise of never-ending life. Amen.

And now the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

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✠ Soli Deo Gloria