

Travelling light – with or without honour

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 4 July, 2021

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 6B

Contemporary reading: from *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World* by Tyson Yunakaporta; Mark 6: 1-13

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

May I speak in the name of God. The God of love and peace and justice. Amen

I'm going to share some slides, partly so you don't have to look at me all the time; and to help illuminate what I want to say.

If, metaphorically speaking, one of the capital cities of Australia represented the earliest forms of the Christian Church, which would it be? One answer, for me, at least in terms of an old joke, would be Perth. For remember how that old joke went: in Sydney, they ask '*how much money do you have?*' – little sadly has changed in recent decades; in Melbourne, they ask '*which school did you go to?*'. In Adelaide – times have changed - they ask '*which church do you go to?*'; and, in Perth, they ask '*so what did you come here to get away from?*'

Now, there is a good deal more to it than that. Yet, when they gathered together, there would have been a degree of truth in some of the earliest Christians asking one another '*so what did you come here to get away from?*' That, as we can see from Gospel passages such as that we heard today, is part of the early Jesus movement story. That story was very much also about where Jesus and his earliest followers were headed to. Yet what they were getting away from is vital to understand. For why did Jesus do no great deeds in his home town? And why did he counsel his first followers to travel light, and be prepared to shake the dust off their feet, even if it meant enduring the metaphorical equivalent of crossing the Nullarbor?

Rather like the 'nest' of stories which precede today's Gospel passage, about which Penny spoke last week, the author of Mark's Gospel continues to challenge us about boundaries and their crossing, about who and what is truly central, and about how leaving for the edges is actually coming home. For, similarly, at the heart of today's stories is a rethinking of what is honour and shame, those powerful forces which helped shaped the ancient world.

Honour and shame – these are keys to many stories in the New Testament. In the modern Western world, we have lost much of this understanding, even though such concepts are still vital elsewhere, not least in parts of the Middle East and Asia. In the modern world, it is money, and schooling, race, and class, and, until recently, religious affiliations, which have particularly shaped lives and destinies. In the world of Jesus, it was where one stood in terms of honoured relationships and purity codes.

As I've said, these factors alone can hardly explain the rise of early Christianity. Not least this is because there are also distinctive religious features at play, partly highlighted in the second part of our Gospel reading today. However it is highly significant that those who most easily responded to Jesus were those who were at least under pressure, if not dislocated, from traditional patterns of purity and honour: not least many women, slaves, and small craftspeople. These were the backbone of the early Christian movement, for they felt what historians and sociologists call 'status anxiety'.

There are several words and phrases in today's Gospel reading which make greater sense when we see them in this context. As elsewhere in Mark's Gospel, as we saw in last week's Gospel reading, we are presented with edges and boundaries, and with challenges as to how we will respond to them. Let me therefore offer three ways into understanding the rejection of Jesus in this passage and a pathway to understanding such boundary crossing as re-integrating the dishonourable and shamed who followed Jesus.

The first, and most obvious, way into understanding the rejection of Jesus is the Tall Poppy syndrome. For it is easy to read lines such as '*is this not the carpenter's son?*' in that sense. Maybe fuelled by an inability fully to affirm, by insecurity or envy, or a desire to puncture pretensions, there is sometimes a human tendency not to value what is among us.

Sometimes it is perhaps because a tall poppy may seem to show up the rest of us; or because their light is found to be too bright, or challenging; or because we may simply try to carry on regardless. Was that part of what happened with Jesus in his home town? It has certainly been a notable feature of Australian culture hasn't it? Not for nothing have many Australians had to leave home to be fully appreciated in their callings.

We might therefore reflect today how we - as individuals, as a community, and as part of our nation - may be failing to appreciate others among us, ignoring, or resisting them, as, like Jesus, they bear prophetic gifts. Theta's the first way of understanding the rejection of Jesus.

A second way into understanding the rejection of Jesus is what we might call the Necessity of Leaving Home syndrome. This, not least, is sadly still all-too-common among sexually and gender diverse people. In order to thrive as, or simply be, the people we are created and called to be, some of us have to leave our homes and families. The more we come out into the light, into being who we are, speaking and living our light, our love and our truth, the more we may find ourselves no longer honoured at home, or among our families.

So, metaphorically, we may not all, like Jesus elsewhere, be led by our religious or other communities, to a cliff to be thrown off it. But our true selves and our offerings are frozen out in other ways. No wonder that, in the second part of today's Gospel reading, Jesus therefore encourages us '*to shake off the dust*' of the places that will not receive us. Again, what might this say to us - as individuals, as a community, and as part of our wider society? Who, and in what respects, are we forcing to shake off the dust from our dwelling places, because we are failing fully to honour them and receive their gifts? Of what might we also need to let go and move on?

The Tall Poppy and the Necessity of Leaving Home syndromes are very real, aren't they? Yet there is an even more important third way into understanding the rejection of Jesus. This is what we might call the Without Honour syndrome.

This brings us back to the ancient context, and to the centrality of honour and shame. For Jesus is not rejected simply for being a tall poppy, or for being (in my opinion) a definitely 'queer' kind of person (not necessarily literally but in other ways) who does not fit his home and family conventions. That may be part of the discomfiture of his community. But the reality is much deeper. For Jesus was teaching and living another pathway altogether.

The ancient Roman world was built around the idea of patrons and clients in mutually enriching exchanges. As clients attached themselves to patrons, so they would both strengthen the honour of the patron, and acquire some of their honour. Maybe a modern equivalent is celebrity-advertising, albeit more clearly based on money. Relationships in both cases are clearly transactional. Perhaps the Olympics have some similarities too. If, for example, an Olympian is successful, their community, even their whole nation, may associate themselves with their honour and glory, even naming buildings, sports fields, and other things after them. But this is not the way of Jesus!

Nazareth, and not least its synagogue, must have been pretty annoyed with Jesus. Here was a clearly outstanding person, with increasing celebrity status, yet highly problematic. For Jesus wasn't playing the game. The Patron Client game. By rights, Nazareth should have been gaining in honour. Jesus however wasn't only failing to acknowledge his home and family. He was actively distancing himself from them. Remember at the end of Mark chapter 3, where Jesus is told his mother and siblings are waiting for him, and he responds '*who are my mother and sister and brother? They are those who do the will of God?*'

Today's Gospel passage has to be read in relation to that, and to other sayings and actions of Jesus which simply fail to play the honour game. No wonder there will be no Jesus plaque, or room in the Nazareth synagogue, never mind a Jesus sports field! Jesus is failing to recognise his responsibilities to bestow honour. More than this he is deliberately associating with those who have little, or no, honour: those who have, or should feel, shame.

Honour and shame, as dictated by ancient, or modern, norms – Jesus just won't have a bar of them. Other transactional, and/or de-personalising, modern norms of relating are no better – be they money, schooling, race, class, or anything else. You can't do deals with God, Jesus is saying. That, I think, is why the Nazareth rejection of Jesus is followed, in Mark's Gospel, by Jesus' encouragement to his disciples to travel lightly, carrying minimum baggage, lest they get caught up in some transactional deal. It is a terrible temptation, and as individuals, and as a community, we are all vulnerable to it.

The Taizé Community is one of the few religious communities I know to recognise and actively resist this. They have regularly been offered sponsorship, by all kinds of bodies, for their international meetings, and other gatherings, which have drawn extraordinary numbers of millions of young people over the years. They have always however refused it. For once we enter into such a deal, they say, we risk losing our soul.

Does that mean that no transactional agreements are possible for followers of Christ? No. We are not all monastics and we live in an imperfect world. Yet today's Gospel is a powerful reminder to us that the way of Jesus is, at its heart, not about such honours. Not about such honour games. Ultimately, it is always beyond them.

This brings us, finally, back to the revolutionary pathway on which Jesus encouraged his disciples. For, in the earliest generations, the Tall Poppy and the Necessity of Leaving syndromes undoubtedly drew into the Jesus movement those who could not fit repressive conventions. The Without Honour syndrome undoubtedly drew many more. For, unsurprisingly, it was those who had little or no honour, like many women and slaves, who rejoiced in the freedom Jesus offered – and of which Paul speaks so strongly.

It also drew those whose honour and standing was rocky, like those fishing folk and fellow artisans, fellow carpenters, whose social and economic anxiety were so high. For the Jesus pathway not only overturned the honour and purity systems but the political and monetary scheming which went with them.

Sadly, Church history has often become a story of fresh transactional systems, full of their own honour and shame relationships. Yet the pathway has always remained. It is still open to us and others to walk. Crucially however, as Jesus taught and lived, it involves the willingness to travel light and to shake off what does not work. Vitally, it involves travelling with, or without, honour. So I'm not sure that today's Church is really like Perth. For, like Jesus in Nazareth, what Hebrews says is true: *'here we have no abiding city, for we look to the city that is to come'*. (Hebrews 13.14)

As another prophet without much honour in his own times, Vincent Van Gogh, put it:

'everything on earth changes – we have no abiding city here – it is the experience of everybody. That it is God's will that we should part with what is dearest on earth – we ourselves change in many respects, we are not what we once were, we shall not remain what we are now.'

In the name of the One who is not interested in our honour, but only in our hearts, and who shares and transforms our sin and shame.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.