

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 4 July 2021

*Lord God, may your word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

Mark 6:1-13

### ***Love's mission***

Jesus' ministry can be called love's mission. We may say that mission of love is to love others as God loves the world. But what is it exactly? In Mark 6, Jesus shows that love's mission itself can be a challenge to certain people. Their prejudice against him prevented them from seeing him as a true agent of the love of God. Jesus also lets us know that love's mission is to empower those who believe in this love to live by it. In doing so, the goal of love is to make this outward movement continue.

### ***Love challenges social mores***

Not all welcomed the mission of love represented by Jesus as he doesn't fit in the same cultural expectations. In Mark 6:1-13, we read that Jesus is not welcomed in his hometown. This incident is right after the three miracle stories of chapter 5. The village people may have heard about Jesus' healing of the Gerasene demoniac,<sup>1</sup> the healing of Jairus' daughter,<sup>2</sup> and the healing of the woman with the haemorrhage.<sup>3</sup> But it doesn't seem to affect them much. The rejection of Jesus is not a new thing. In an earlier visit, his family went out to seize him, for they said that he was insane.<sup>4</sup> In another, the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He has Beelzebul,' and 'by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.'<sup>5</sup> Now seeing Jesus teaching at the synagogue, they are amazed. As far as they know, he is the carpenter, Mary's son, and they know his family too. For them, Jesus' act as a prophet is absurd. In such an honour/shame society, 'prophets' would receive the honour. Yet, the traditional wisdom of the age wouldn't allow Jesus to be a prophet for them. When measured by the criteria set by the world as to what a religious leader ought to be, Jesus simply does not stand up well either. He is not successful enough or influential enough, or prestigious enough to merit honour. Here his work of love isn't sufficient enough to be recognized unless he meets the criteria.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 5:1-20

<sup>2</sup> Mark 5:21-23; 35-43

<sup>3</sup> Mark 5:24-34

<sup>4</sup> Mark 3:21

<sup>5</sup> Mark 3:21-22

In response to this, Jesus doesn't exercise power. In v6, it reads, "and he was amazed at their unbelief," the word 'amazed'<sup>6</sup> in the Gospels is almost always directed to Jesus, his life, and his works. People are often surprised to see the work of Jesus and hear his words. But in this case, the objects of astonishment are people's unbelief that makes him stop the deed of power. Jesus himself becomes a stumbling block for them as they fail to see him beyond his birth family and their social status. Yet, love's mission doesn't stop there but continue to empower people.

### ***Love empowers people to love others***

When love empowers people to love others, a few principles are applied. The first thing Jesus does is to send them two by two. There are reasons. First, a partner gives strength – “For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help.”<sup>7</sup> Partners protect each other from physical danger, but they also encourage each other in difficult circumstances. Next, a second person lends credibility. In Deuteronomy 15:19, it requires two or three witnesses to convict a person of a crime, as a single witness is likely to make a mistake. Likewise, when sending disciples to bear witness to the good news, two people fulfil the condition. A partner also fosters accountability. A person is able to resist temptation when accompanied by a partner.

Love empowers people with authority from God as Jesus gives them authority over the unclean spirits. That is, they are equipped with the word of God, faith to overcome temptation, and fear for life. But most of all, it sustains them to live and work in love as witnesses to this love.

Last, Love extends its boundary by creating new space and time. Jesus tells the twelve to take nothing but a staff and sandals - no bread, no bag, no money, and only a single tunic. He prohibits not only frivolous items but essential ones as well. The requirement that the twelve not carry bread reminds us of God's instructions to the Israelites regarding manna. They were to trust that God would provide daily manna, gathering only an *omer* of manna per person each day and not keeping any of it overnight.<sup>8</sup> Still, his requirements go beyond simplicity to reckless faith. The disciples are to proceed without adequate preparation, trusting local people for hospitality but, above all, trusting God to provide for their needs. In doing so, it opens new space and time where the needy and the potential provider would meet up. This space and time are where love works responsively. For the local people, they have to make extra room and

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<sup>6</sup> θαυμάζω *thaumazō* be amazed, be astonished

<sup>7</sup> Ecclesiastes 4:10

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 16:16-19

time to have the disciples in their house. For the disciples, they have to be prepared to accept anything in any environment offered to them. At the same time, the needy and the provider's roles can be reversed. The disciples offer spiritual care for the household while they are staying there. In this way, they learn how to continue the mission of love. Jesus does not require his disciples to be ascetics. He does require faith in this love of God. As read, they carry on a successful campaign, consisting of preaching, healing, and exorcism. It means that not only do the disciples derive their direction from Jesus, but he also gives them the power to do the same mighty works that he has done. By his decision and not theirs, they become the extension of his ministry.

***The goal of love is to continue to spread love***

The rejection of love's mission is real, as in Jesus' instruction to shake off the dust from the sandals. Yet, love doesn't stop loving but hopes that a change of mind may take place later. Therefore this instruction is not about giving up the mission, but about hope for the disciples to continue the work of love. Jesus has also received such a response from religious officials, from the citizens of his hometown, and even from his family, but he never stops loving, for it is the only way for them to live.

In our story time, the story – *The king and the magician*, the king was very jealous of the magician's reputation. In the end, the king asked him a cunning question that may trick the magician into death. Yet, the magician was wise enough to see this evil scheme. In the end, his answer made the king more anxious than before. There are a few possible answers to the question – 'what did the king realize in the end?' One answer may be that the king may have realized that to love the magician as himself was the only way for him to live. Indeed, the same answer is what we have already found in the gospel reading.

The stories about the mission of Love inform that our presence as the church can be a challenge to certain circles of people in the society where the truth is relativized, and faith privatized. In this postmodern society, people seem to want the facts only so that they make up their own minds about what constitutes the truth. We seem to have substituted the relative for the absolute. But Love from the truth of the cross cannot be confined in temples, dogmas, dreams, and it cannot be reduced to anything by relativism, secularism, or individualism. So be comforted and brave. Open new space and time wherever we go. Engage people in God-talk and make them realize that only through this Love in Christ they can and will live today and in the eternal. Amen.

