

Anglican Church Arnhem-Nijmegen – 7 July 2024

Readings: Mark 6:1-13; 2 Corinthians 12.2-10 (Revd Wim Kuiper)

This is the time of the year when many of us are packing to go on holiday. Including me, as I am already leaving tomorrow first for a retreat, and then for some leisurely traveling. So this evening and tomorrow morning I will be fudging over what to take with me. Always a bit anxious not to forget something really important. And it is quite ironic that exactly at this time, this particular Gospel story pops up. Hearing Jesus saying: Take nothing for the journey except a staff, one tunic and a pair of sandals. In St Matthew's version it is even less: go without the staff and the sandals. I guess the least we should take from these words of the Lord, is to go about our traveling a bit more lightly and relaxed. To relativize the desire to have everything meticulously planned in every detail, letting some room for surprises, good or bad ones. Staying aware that we are, of course, never fully in control. Also taking our holidays as part of that ongoing exercise to grow in trust on the Lord's providence.

There is another simple but important lesson to be taken from this passage, that has helped me on several occasions. It is this proverb 'to shake off the dust on your feet' at those moments when you have the feeling that you are not really welcome, not fully understood, not properly listened to, not truly accepted. An experience that we all have to go through from time to time. And, to be fair, experiences that we may also have caused in others by our own behaviour towards them from time to time. For me, this translates into the effort not to take everything too personal, not to slip into unhelpful feelings of victimhood, not to become resentful or passive aggressive. Also relativizing the sometimes forceful emotions of disappointment, anger and bitterness, in the same way as all those feelings of anxiousness, related to the efforts to somehow stay in control. One of the many things I have learned from the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, is to cultivate a certain indifference to all those familiar and stressful experiences that cause so many unhelpful and negative emotions. Indifference, to all that in the end is less important compared to what we should regard as of true central importance in our lives, which is God's constant flow of grace and love for us and for the whole of his creation. Whatever our circumstances, we can always return to that flow and stay grounded in it. This flow is able to defend us from any evil spirits, emotions and desires, with the power of love to even cast them out. A flow that brings wholeness and healing into our lives and into the lives of those around us and of our communities. Also through us, as we follow Jesus' calling on us as to become the missionaries, the apostles of this flow, with or without a staff and sandals and those many other things we are carrying.

Jesus of course gives us the best example of living out such a life. For instance in how he reacts to the fact that he is not accepted by his contemporaries, here in his home town of Nazareth. We hear that he was just 'amazed by their unbelief'. Why can't they see his true divine authority? Because they have also seen him as that fully human being, growing up as an ordinary child in the household of a lowly carpenter. In their view, he should have just stepped into the footsteps of his stepfather, keeping everything in its right order. The kind of thinking full of prejudice that is still very much alive in our own society. But one of the important aspects of Jesus' earthly ministry is that he crosses all those manmade boundaries. He crushes all those walls between social classes, ethnicities and you name it.

The hostile reaction to this in his home town is a foretaste of the outright rejection and violent persecution that will follow later on.

But the movement that is initiated by Jesus and by these first missionary endeavours of his disciples, continues to grow after his death and resurrection. It is a movement characterised by some wonderful paradoxes. One of the most important of these paradoxes is the combination of a tremendous divine power with extreme human weakness. It is the paradox of the cross, that is at the heart of the Christian message. God in Jesus, humbling himself to a shameful and violent death, in order to fully bring about the astonishing grace of his saving power on earth. St Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians speaks of this paradox with these very clear and simple words 'Power is made perfect in weakness.' He knows that some people tend to look up at him because of the great spiritual experiences that he is assumed to have. But at the same time, he knows that he is not a very eloquent and charismatic speaker. And here, we hear him telling about a thorn in the flesh, perhaps related to this, or something else completely. (There has always been a lot of speculation about this, but we simply do not know.) Anyhow, he has begged God to take it away from him. But he has, in the end, learned how to embrace this weakness as something that is simply part of who he is. Embracing it as something that helps him not to get too elated about himself. That keeps him with his feet on the ground, making him to stay humble and therefore open to God's amazing grace working in and through him, despite or even precisely because of this weakness, this so called, thorn in his flesh. Elsewhere we hear him openly admitting that he continues to not understand his own actions: 'For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.' (Rom 7.19). This great apostle has learned how to live well with all his strengths and weaknesses. Having a realistic picture of the broken and flawed being that he continues to be, despite of his conversion. The acceptance and understanding of weaknesses and sinfulness helped him and helps us to acknowledge our constant dependence on God's grace, on the need of the power of Christ to dwell within us. A power that carried St Paul through all the insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities that he encountered, and that we may encounter as well. A power that on the other hand, also helps us to stay humble when we enjoy our successes and be grateful for our good times, such as, hopefully, in our upcoming Summer holidays.

So may we, in the midst of all the ups and downs of our daily lives, continue to calm and quieten our souls; to keep us humble and full of wonder and trust, as we live in God's love.

Amen