

**NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH,
SUNDAY 7 JULY 2012
PENTECOST 6
Psalm 126, Mark 6: 1-13**



SERMON: “A two way street”

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Prejudice, ever met with persistent, impossible to correct prejudice?

Ever met with somebody that thought you were something or somebody you were not? Or have you perhaps yourself ever made the awful mistake of thinking somebody someone or something *they* were not?

Perhaps you have experienced *both*. Most of us have at some stage or another. Prejudice perhaps about our education, be it in a positive or in a negative sense. Prejudice about our background, our gender, our abilities, our appearance, our job, our age even by others, as well as the embarrassing discovery our prejudices have led us to assumptions about someone or something that weren't helpful.

I'll never forget the day, in my first placement, where I went to visit a very nice and friendly looking old man in the nursing home that was part of my parish and introduced myself as the minister.

He looked at me in utter and honest astonishment and said: “You can't be”.

To which I answered: “Can't be what”.

Where upon he said: “the minister”

and I answered: “why not”

and he said “because you're a woman

and apart from that you are far too young”.

He kept looking me straight in the eye, oblivious of any political incorrectness he might be guilty of, just completely and utterly convinced that somehow he had mistaken what I'd said. I simply could not be, as far as his imagination went, the minister and that was that. I became good friends with this man, he saw me take services, serve communion, bury some of his friends, baptise his grand children, but he never believed I was “the” minister. That I'd come to help he would accept, and even appreciate. That I was “the” (only) minister there in charge of the whole parish, he could not. His prejudice stronger than any evidence that I (or others) could supply him with.

When Jesus visits his home town, I believe it is this same kind of prejudice he meets with. He has been “on tour”, has traveled around the country preaching and healing and doing some pretty spectacular stuff. He stilled a storm, healed a woman who had been ill for twelve years, raised a twelve year old girl from the dead and liberated a man from a host of demons that had taken possession of his mind. Pretty impressive one would say, and it should have been enough to convince anybody that this man might have something to say that could be of interest.

At first it seems the people of his home town seem to recognize this. They are very impressed with his teaching and preaching, with his words and the way he explains scripture with authority and insight. Mark is, unlike the other gospels, very sparse in what he tells us about the content of Jesus' preaching. As if whatever he had to say to the

people in his home town didn't matter as much, as the mere fact that it is the carpenter's boy addressing them.

It is as if they shake themselves, and suddenly look at him from a completely different perspective:

Hang on, isn't this the son of Mary, (and perhaps *not* of Joseph if the rumors are right), he who learned to be a carpenter in his father's shop? Isn't this the boy that grew up down the street? Who we saw limping home with grazed knees just a while ago? Whose brothers and sisters we all know very well? Who does he think he is? A prophet? Come on!

And they turn their back on him, whispering, or not even whispering, not even trying to conceal their anger, their disdain for the boy from the village who has taken on airs, a tall poppy, sticking his head too far above the parapet...

Can you imagine it? Can you imagine what it must have been like?

The text says Jesus' reaction is one of amazement. Apparently he had not expected them to be quite so set in their ideas about him, so determined to overlook even the clearest evidence that he might have something to offer them. He may have hoped that instead of anger and disdain, they would have rejoiced that one from amongst them had found his calling, had been called to higher things. That they'd have been proud of him, or appreciative, or perhaps even argumentative, but positive. But they don't. They aren't. They can't. They are locked within their mind-frames. Mind-frames that rule out that one of their own can be fulfilling God's promises from their village. That the Kingdom of God can't have its origin in their midst.

Thinking about it I realized had I been one of the good people of Nazareth I probably also would have found it hard to believe. Even with the evidence of miracles and good preaching. That God could start fulfilling age old promises from here, from North Balwyn, on this ordinary, middle of the road, run of the mill Sunday morning, in this congregation. Come on! Haven't we had our day? Way back in the seventies when the Sunday schools were overflowing? Way back in the time when the Wesley brothers caused a great stir for the gospel in England? Way back when Luther and Calvin and John Knox were doing their thing? Even further back at other times in history when men and women were inspired and inspiring and revitalising the faith of their contemporaries? You're telling me that the Messiah is here, at work in our midst on this Sunday morning? Offering us wisdom to guide our lives and working miracles?

Jesus is amazed, and paralyzed. He could do nothing it says. A few healings (as if that isn't enough, I'd settle for a couple of those I think) but no more.

Prejudice and suspicion, defensiveness and the negative judgement emerging from it, render him completely powerless. Even someone like Jesus. He can't do anything. Where the Kingdom started it stops as well. No miracles in this place, just unbelief and set minds. Some of you may recognise the experience. Of coming to a place ready to offer the best God has given you and running into a brick wall in every direction.

The people of Nazareth cannot believe miracles can happen in their midst, so they don't. They can't believe the prophecies could be fulfilled through one of their own, so they are not, at least not in their midst.

They can't believe God would manifest himself in the boy they know so well, a boy of doubtful origins, a tradesman with calluses on his hands roaming the countryside with twelve fishermen as his best friends, so their hearts stay untouched.

Perhaps we should, at this point, reflect on our own convictions as to what can and can't happen to us. On the mind-frames that may keep Christ from working in us and through us here and now. On the convictions about ourselves and those who are part of our community that prevent us from seeing evidence of the Spirit at work. Because we might, because we have our mind set in a certain way, be blocking out any inspiration, any miracles, any new insights, even before they can even begin to happen.

Every Sunday we celebrate that Christ comes in our midst and invites us to be part of his body, and give shape to his presence in the world. A miracle-working and healing presence. What the story tells us is that if we don't believe anything can happen it won't. If we don't believe Jesus will start changing our world here, today, with us, he won't be able to and might have to go someplace else.

There have been several times where I've come across the Spirit at work in this congregation. And I realised, when studying the passage for this Sunday, that I for one, am doing exactly what the people of Nazareth did when they were confronted with activity of the divine in their midst. I recognised a deep reluctance within myself to even accept that the Spirit may actually be at work among us. And not only reluctance, a deep suspicion and fear of what seems beyond control and out of the ordinary, out of the expected. And I am assuming that it was the same for those people in Nazareth. Fear, suspicion, insecurity, loss of control, their view of the world challenged, their mind frames bended in a direction they found really too far outside the norm, and a deep reluctance to change deep rooted thoughts and ideas as to how the world fits together. Because it is not only their ideas about the son of the carpenter that are challenged, it is their ideas about themselves and who and what they are, it is their ideas of what God at work might look like, in their midst, in their time. Apart from being the boy they knew from the time he was in nappies, Jesus challenges the way things are, have always been, their tradition, their religion, their perception of who and what they are. Jesus is not just working a couple of miracles, and preaching a few good sermons, he is taking the old religion they know in a completely new direction, opening up ways of relating to God that are totally at odds with what they have learned to trust is right, he is reaching outside age-old and honoured boundaries into a wider world they had learned was dangerous and to be avoided. No wonder they bristle. No wonder they resist. No wonder they want to see him go. Anything, but please do not disturb our equilibrium!

North Balwyn is generally not a place associated with outpourings of the Spirit, a place where we expect miracles to happen and receive visions, to speak with imagery the prophet Joel used to paint the picture of what happens when God is at work. We struggle to come to terms with God's work, to incorporate it in our world view, accept it, appreciate it, and take it seriously. Because, really, we are convinced that mostly these things are of the past, or for what we generally consider to be more fanciful denominations. We know ourselves too well as well as the mental, spiritual and rational barriers that have been built in to us by our tradition, our education and our background.

I have had a couple of experiences over the course of my life where I have felt the divine break through those barriers. Have felt the Spirit fill my heart and mind and come close. Every time it happened I have gone through a "Nazareth experience" as well. Can't be, because it's me, and I know me, and I am far to rational, cynical, stitched up, suspicious,

and secular to be having these experiences. And apart from that: God knows all too well I'm no John Calvin or Wesley, or even one of the smaller prophets that have been called to service over the ages. And yet. Over time I have learned to accept these glimmers of the divine, allow them in, open up to them and trust them for what they are: glimpses of the divine breaking into ordinary life with hints of direction, images of what could be, dreams drawing me to a future it seems to want me to be part of and participating in. A future congruent with what I have learned to recognise, through years of reading scripture and participating in worship, as the world Jesus was calling us to journey towards.

Straight after the experience in Nazareth Jesus' friends are sent out. To preach the gospel and work miracles. They go with the knowledge that even he couldn't do everything. That in his hometown he was defeated by the prejudice and unbelief of some. Rendered powerless. That their master could not do everything.

And that is a comforting thought.

From that place where reluctance to believe, suspicion and doubt, fear and resistance to the unexpected, challenges our faith and close our hearts and minds to God's working in our midst, we are sent out into the world to testify nevertheless, fighting our own prejudice at times as to what is, and what isn't possible from where we are and who we are in life. Challenged to believe, to accept, to open our hearts and minds to the possibility that God is, may still be, involved, with us, through us, around us.

We are, have also been sent out and will be sent out again today when we leave this church. That the message doesn't always work, that our words don't always catch, our visions, our dreams, even the miracles that happen, aren't always appreciated, accepted or recognised for what they are, doesn't mean they are not true. And that is a comfort. We can shake the dirt of our feet and continue on our way.

But we have to keep trying and not let anything get in the way of that. No preset mind, or anything material that would tie us down. (Hence the prohibition on taking any earthly goods on this journey). What we were or what we are, what people think of us or what we think of ourselves is not important in the eyes of God. He sees us as we are, without prejudice, for him we are just people he loves, people he wants to work with, people he wants to build a Kingdom with. People he needs to believe that he is at work in them. In you, in me, in someone we've known all our lives, the boy next door, or the girl from down the street. Doubtful descent, bad education, callused hands, and all. Sitting with us in the pews and at the table, pronouncing that the Kingdom is here, today, ready to work miracles from our midst. Amen.