

**Sermon for Riddells Creek and Mount Macedon
5th of July, 2009**

2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10

Psalms 48

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Mark 6:1-13

Today's four readings appear to divide themselves neatly in two. The readings from the Hebrew Scriptures, part of the story of David, and the psalm, tell of victory and strength. The New Testament readings, from the gospel of Mark, and Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, tell of rejection and weakness. This apparent contrast between strength and weakness reminds us just how rich and complicated a collection of writings the Bible is. But I want to argue that all four readings are actually about the strength that comes from trusting in God, and that the real difference between them is how that strength is shown.

Throughout these weeks of ordinary time in the Year of Mark we hear the story of David, Israel's great king. Today, David is at the highpoint of his life. After the death of Saul all the tribes of Israel beg David to become their ruler. From being a fugitive, David becomes monarch: "David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned for forty years. At Hebron he reigned over Judah for seven years and six months; and at Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah for thirty-three years ... And David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him." Today's reading tells of David taking the stronghold of Zion in Jerusalem and making it into the city of David. And today's psalm is about the glory and strength of Zion; so great that when other kings see it they panic. The psalmist tells us that "they took to flight; trembling took hold of them there, pains as of a woman in labour, as when an east wind shatters the ships of Tarshish." The God of David in this week's readings is the Lord of hosts, the God of armies and of victory. From this story of victories we come to Mark's story and Paul's letter.

Last week, Mark told us of Jesus' healing of two women, the woman with a haemorrhage and the daughter of Jairus. In that story Jesus was the successful healer, the miracle worker. This week, the story is different, because Jesus goes home. And as Jesus himself says: "Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house". Today's story presents Jesus in all his humanness. And Jesus' humanity is exactly the problem for the people of his home town. Because of their difficulty with it, today's story is in fact an *un-miracle* story.

To the people of Nazareth, Jesus is not the teacher, healer and worker of miracles. He is the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon and his sisters. They cannot believe that this man that they know, this ordinary labourer, could be empowered and authorised by God. This is the scandal of the incarnation. God, the mighty, the victor, the one who enabled David to become greater and greater, became someone ordinary, someone known, a carpenter, son and brother. For those who expected to see God only in great victories, as the Lord of hosts, this ordinary person, Jesus, could not be the bearer of the presence of God. They would not allow God to be the mystery that God must always be. And so they rejected Jesus, and he could do no deed of power there, although he did cure a few sick people.

The message of this episode in Jesus' life remains profoundly relevant today. The greatest enemy to faith can be simple familiarity. God and God's prophetic agents are meant to be impressive. God is meant to speak in mighty deeds and through charismatic leaders. God is meant to reveal Godself in novelty. God is not meant to come to us in the familiar and domestic. And yet that is exactly what happened to the people of Nazareth. God came to them as one of them, known and common and ordinary. And the people of Nazareth couldn't go beyond the limitations of their own domestic experience and rejected him. We need to ask how often we miss the signs of God's work because we expect God's miracles to be flashy and awe-inspiring, and God's messengers to be charismatic and novel.

Jesus' mission does not, of course, end, just because his own town has rejected him. Jesus in fact extends his ministry by sharing it with the twelve, he now commissions them to repeat in their lives and mission exactly what he himself does. He instructs them to go out two by two, taking nothing for their journey except a staff, wearing sandals and staying in the first house that welcomes them until they leave a place. These instructions ensure that the lifestyle of the twelve is a statement in itself. The missionaries are to put their lives where their words are. They go out in pairs, because according to Jewish law two people provide reliable evidence, and because the mission is communal; no single charismatic personality is mentioned. Their staff and sandals are symbols of the pilgrimage lifestyle that they are taking up. They are not to move from house to house seeking better lodgings. And they are to travel light to show trust in the authority that sent them and to ward off suggestions of self-serving. In the way they minister, as well as in the content of their ministry, the twelve are following the Christ that Mark presents as always on a journey.

The mission of the Twelve foreshadows the mission of the Church. Like the twelve, the church is always a community on the way, entrusted with the message of the gospel and the healing ministry of the sacraments. We are to live as Jesus lived and as the disciples lived. The charge to travel light and accept whatever accommodation is offered still applies. This means that like Jesus and the Twelve, the Church, too, can expect rejection. One of the instructions that Jesus gives the Twelve is: "If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." The Twelve may cast out demons and cure the sick, but just as healing and miracles did not ensure a welcome for Jesus in Nazareth, this won't guarantee a welcome for the disciples. There will be places that reject them. And we, the Church, following both, can expect to be rejected sometimes too.

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians was written out of just such a rejection. Paul had been measured against others who claimed to be apostles and had been found wanting. They were more impressive; they were better speakers; they had greater accomplishments. They had the worldly success that Paul lacked. So Paul had to defend himself. He could have defended himself by telling of his own great deeds. He mentions a revelation or vision of the third heaven, which ancient Jewish cosmology thought of as God's dwelling place. Here Paul refers to himself in the third person: "I know a person in Christ," - but we're fairly certain that Paul is talking about himself. But that experience, Paul says, isn't something to boast of. And just in case Paul was inclined to boast of it, God has given him "a thorn ... in the flesh", a weakness, a failing. Paul has to accept that he is a weak and fallible human being; and yet his very weakness is something to boast about, because it enables Christ's power to dwell in him. If Paul could rely on his own strength, he wouldn't need Christ's grace.

Both Jesus and Paul are facing communities that are more concerned with their own perceptions of who is bearing God's invitation to new life than the new life itself. For the people of Nazareth, the message of God could not be brought by someone familiar and ordinary. For the Corinthians, the gospel was to be shared by super apostles, not someone like Paul. I imagine that some of the people who rejected the Twelve on their mission did so for the same reason; these were ordinary men, peasants, not highly educated, not special. And today, people interested in spirituality and seeking a connection with the numinous might reject the gospel the church proclaims because it is so familiar, part of their childhood and dull and boring. And yet it might be in just such ordinary and familiar people, in Sunday worship and old-fashioned Christian disciplines like prayer and Bible reading, that the presence of God is revealed. Brendan Byrne points out that progress in the spiritual life almost always shows itself in the ability to recognise God in the ordinary. Saints like Francis are overwhelmed at the presence of God in every tiny aspect of life.

"David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him," the book of Samuel tells us. But if we only look for God in the presence of the great, we might be like the people of Nazareth and miss God altogether. And if we try to share God's message despite our very ordinariness we like the Twelve might face rejection. I think Paul had it right. We might want the strength that God showed David. But if we are following Jesus, the carpenter, the son of Mary and

brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, then we need to be able to say with the Apostle: “I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” Because in our weakness, the God of the familiar and ordinary is with us. Thanks be to God.