



Sunday Reflection

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 7 July 2024

Pentecost 7

The Curate will preach at St John's

Today we think about our part in accepting God's free grace. We ask for the faith to believe in God's love for us and God's power to renew our lives.

And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief. (Mark 6.5-6)

A story to set the scene

"YOU'LL NIVER DAE ANYHIN WI YER LIFE!"

This is a line from 'What happened to the Jaggy nettles?' a play by WAC (We are Citizens), a theatre ensemble of care experienced young people set up by CELCIS, the centre of excellence in that area and the Citizen's Theatre. The production is about the struggles of an imaginary punk band, the Jaggy Nettles, in the 1970s and early 1980s as they struggle for recognition. It was described as 'a story of friendship, deception and the power of punk'.

Being part of the production gave the young people the opportunity to express their talents as actors. It also created strong bonds because of their shared experiences. But most of all, it increased their confidence and brought recognition. Here's what some of them said:¹

¹ <https://stories.celcis.org/wac-ensemble/index.html>

“People have this perception of people who are care experienced as always being involved with the police or out to wreak havoc. People still think we are these terrors but what’s great about WAC and the Citizens is how seriously they take us as professionals.” (Chloe Wypers).

“I grew up in care for a very long time and I would never tell anyone I was in care because there’s a stigma there and people would have a perception of you, so I wouldn’t feel comfortable sharing that. But now I do, because I’m a care leaver and look how brilliant I am. Look how brilliant we all are. So it’s really given me the confidence to say, this is who I am.” (one of the actors, anon.)

“Being in the care system it can really take a toll on you and I think you feel that you don’t have the same ability to reach your goals like other people do. So coming in here and having no judgement off the bat from anyone and have just that deeper understanding that we all have something like that that we can relate with, was good.” (Kieran McKenzie).

Reputation isn’t just something that affects the lives of politicians or celebrities. Assumptions and expectations about what we can do in life, whether because of our gender, our class, our race, where we live, even our sexuality can cast a significant shadow over future lives. It takes a counterweight – good parenting, a committed teacher or social worker, the belief of others - to instil the confidence and hope to counter those preconceptions.

Today’s Gospel teaching

When Jesus returns home from Capernaum, there is the usual astonishment at the power of his teaching and the depth of his wisdom. But there is a difference in what people make of that. Because the people in Nazareth think they know who he is because they know where he comes from. It’s a classic case of ‘I ken your faither’ – except of course they don’t! Or perhaps it is ‘tall poppy’ syndrome – they can’t bear to see one of their own getting above themselves and, we’re told, ‘they take offence at him’. Jesus seems unprepared for this and we see him almost vulnerable. And here’s what I find truly astonishing in this passage. We’re told that their reaction took away some of his power. He could still manage some faith healing apparently, but his capacity to perform ‘deeds of power’ – miracles, perhaps, authoritative acts that demonstrated God’s power, seems to have deserted him. Not until the Passion can I think

of other examples of where Jesus is disempowered like this, even though his teaching and authority is disputed many times.

What's going on? Well think of all the times that Jesus heals someone and says, in effect, that it is their faith that has made the healing possible – 'your faith has made you whole' – the faith of the friends who let down the paralysed man through the roof to reach Jesus, the healing of the woman in the crowd with the issue of blood, the healing of the centurion's daughter. While here he berates the people of his own town for their lack of belief. On the one side there is God's healing power which cannot be susceptible to stops and starts. But it seems there is a need for something else as well for that power to effect transformation. And that is the response of the individual human heart, the willingness to offer oneself and accept forgiveness and healing, a response which involves trust and acknowledgement of who God is, a belief in the power to change us through Christ, in a word, faith.

And then the second story, which at first seems something of a contradiction begins to make sense. It's like the other side of the coin. Jesus sends the disciples out and empowers them with the authority to exorcise 'unclean spirit' and they are able to do so and also to perform acts of healing. Jesus is presumably entirely without doubts as to the potential of God's transforming power. But even so the theme of receptivity returns. He tells them to accept the hospitality of those who welcome them and not to waste time on those who won't listen.

Both stories seem to suggest that it when God's power meets the open heart and the listening ear that faith can grow.

What could it mean for our lives?

I often imagine myself in the synagogue at Nazareth or Capernaum and I ask myself, how would I have responded? I'd like to think of course that I would have been overcome with wonder at Jesus' teaching and been drawn to him, wanting to offer him my life to serve the Kingdom. But suppose I'd been in a cynical mood. I'm sure I have it in me to have been one of those who scoffed and said, 'who does he think he is?'. Where did he train exactly? Is this really sound theology? Why should I listen to him?'

These stories present us with just such challenges, to put ourselves in the shoes of those to whom Jesus first spoke and ask, who are we in this story? What can it tell us about our own faith and relationship with Jesus?

And shortly we will enact for ourselves that meeting of God's grace and power with our readiness of heart. For those desires, God's desire for us and our desire for God, that relationship, is at the heart of the Eucharist.

We start by acknowledging God's power.

We rehearse the offering of Jesus' sacrifice by which our sins are forgiven.

And then we offer ourselves.

And it is in that moment of mutuality that we receive the healing power of Christ's body and blood.

After that, we can indeed be sent out, like the disciples, in the power of the Spirit, to love and to serve.

Faith, like success in life, is not a done deal. Of those young people who took part in the WAC theatre workshops, not all went on to become actors in the company and put on the play. For some, the support was not enough help them grow in confidence and overcome emotional and other trauma. Defeating low expectations, especially when these have become internalised, is a long game. Faith attends to both sides of the equation. Because God's grace is super abundant and available without conditions, it is enough to overcome our deepest doubts about ourselves and its power will not be lessened by our weaknesses. As the Lord told St Paul' *'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'*

But faith calls for something from us too: a willingness to accept who we are, the whole of ourselves, as God's gift and to open up our lives to be used by God for God's service. This is the prayer of St Ignatius Loyola:

Take Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and possess. You have given all to me. To You, O Lord, I return it. All is Yours, dispose of it wholly according to Your will. Give me Your love and Your grace, for this is sufficient for me. Amen.

And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief. (Mark 6.5-6)

& the Rector at St Margaret's:-

We consider today how spending time with Jesus can develop faith that changes the outcomes of our actions.

"They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them." Mark 6:13

An illustration to set the scene

Professional sports players need three things to succeed: **a basic talent, excellent training and a robust mental attitude.**

The best tennis player will be unlikely to win a match if losing a game brings their mood and expectations so low that it affects how they play.

Even just a small drop in mood can have a devastating effect.

What we think really does make a difference to how we perform.

This is because, as we think, we make tiny, imperceptible muscle movements in line with whatever it is we are imagining.

That's why psychologists use techniques like positive visualisation.

If we envisage making a good shot often enough, eventually it becomes hard-wired in us.

And if we imagine our next shot is going to be successful in the face of just having lost a point, we stand more chance of getting it right than if we continue to focus on our recent failure.

It has been shown that the behaviour of the crowd watching a match can have a huge effect, too.

It's easier to practise being positive if we sense that a large number of people are on our side and believe we can do it, which in part accounts for why football and rugby teams often win their home games.

Today's Gospel teaching

Today's Gospel describes the difficulty Jesus had when he visited his own town.

The crowd was most certainly against him. They knew who this person was.

They knew his family.

They'd known him as a child.

Nobody could believe that he could be capable of healing or even of having the kind of wisdom he seemed to be displaying.

They were suspicious and it turned to hostility.

Who is this to tell us what to do, and who is this to bring healing to us?

It must be fake.

Jesus was human, and in the face of this open hostility he could do nothing.

In the place where he should have had everything going for him, in safety among his own people, it turned out not to be so.

The second story we hear today is almost the polar opposite.

Jesus sends out the twelve among the villages.

He deliberately encourages them to be vulnerable.

Take no bread or money.

Don't take an extra tunic.

They are to rely on people in the villages they visit to provide food and accommodation for them.

It's easy to imagine that these new miracle workers would find it very hard to concentrate on the job in hand when they are so vulnerable.

We can only assume that the positive attitude they had built up over the time they'd spent with Jesus helped them to be effective.

In sharp contrast with Jesus' own experience in his home town, they are able to heal those who are sick and to cast out demons.

How can we apply the teaching to our own lives?

God is the best psychologist and spending time with God will enable us to achieve all kinds of things we might never imagine possible.

It has inspired people down the ages to go out and do things they would never have considered if they'd stayed at home.

If we are prepared to leave the security of our own place, whatever that might mean for us, and step out into unknown territory, with God at our side we can achieve great things.

Like the successful tennis player who scores an ace, if we can work with our imagination to visualise the impact that God wants us to have on the world, or our community, then anything is possible.

But also, like the tennis player who works with their coach and psychologist consistently, day after day, we need to build our relationship with God.

Jesus knew that his disciples had been with him long enough to be successful in their mission.

They had listened to his teaching and watched as he healed those who were sick.

They were ready.

Does stepping out into the unknown, like the disciples, seem a frightening prospect?

If God believes in us, then we can learn to believe in ourselves too.

We do not go unprepared, and God is always with us.

"They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them." Mark 6:13

www.SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk