

## **Facing Rejection** by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 4th July 2021 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Ezekiel 2:1-5, Mark 6:1-13

### **Introduction: Familiarity breeds contempt**

Next week at St Michael's we are going to celebrate Bible Sunday. I wonder whether you feel that the Bible is rather "old hat" –you've heard bits of the Bible read so many times that you think you've learnt all you can from them.

The problem, I would suggest, is not with the bible passage, but with our attitude. By thinking we know what it says, we are closing our minds to new insights which the Holy Spirit could give us, if only we had an enquiring mind and an openness to God's voice. And just as we might write off parts of the Bible, so we can also write people off, rather than giving them a chance to show not only who they are, but what they can become.

### **Jesus rejected at Nazareth**

Today's gospel passage may not be one of the more familiar ones, but we may still think there's not much to learn from it. Jesus returns to his hometown, Nazareth, and goes to synagogue on the Sabbath, as he usually did. The way Mark tells it, a lot has happened since Jesus left Nazareth to go down south to be baptised by John the Baptist. After returning to Galilee, Jesus has made his base in Capernaum, a fishing village on the lake, and recruited several fishermen

as well as a number of other people as a close team of disciples. He's been preaching in synagogues and in the open country, and healing large numbers of people, some of whom are specifically mentioned, like Simon Peter's mother. Everyone is talking about Jesus, and everyone wants to see him or get him to heal them or their loved ones.

And then he comes back to Nazareth, where he grew up. What a different reception Jesus gets here!

Football is very much in the news at the moment. Imagine if one of the England squad had grown up in Sandhurst. Even if you're not a fan of football, you'd be proud to know that "one of our boys" was representing his country in the Euros. You might even be tempted to watch a few minutes of a match. And if the team won, you'd be happy to know that a homecoming party was being thrown somewhere in Sandhurst to celebrate our "local hero".

But what happens when Jesus turns up at the synagogue in Nazareth one Saturday? I think we can probably say from today's passage in Mark chapter 6 that he had a very mixed reception. Luke gives a much fuller account of what happened that day.<sup>1</sup> Matthew follows Mark in his chronology, but Luke puts this visit to Nazareth near the beginning of his account of Jesus' ministry, probably because he wants Jesus' words about the prophecy of Isaiah to set the scene for the preaching and healing that Jesus is going to do. The gospel writers weren't seeking to put everything in exact chronological order, partly because they were putting together an account from a number of different anecdotes

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 4:16-30

and remembrances of the people who had originally been there.

I'm inclined to accept Mark's assumption that Jesus had been away from Nazareth for some time – months or maybe as much as a year. Nazareth at the time of Jesus was a village of maybe 500 inhabitants, and Jesus and his family would have been known to everyone. Joseph seems to have died some time ago, and Jesus, now in his early 30's had taken over the carpentry and building business.<sup>2</sup> His younger brothers would by now be earning their own livings, and some of his sisters might well be married with families of their own. The last time many of the villagers saw Jesus might have been when passing his workshop on their way to buy groceries, or when he had finished building the extension to their house, or delivering a new table for their living room.

As the villagers discuss Jesus' teaching that Saturday in the synagogue, they are astounded to hear him speaking like a rabbi – he's a carpenter, after all, the son of Mary. Where did he get all this theology from? And what about those reports of miraculous healings? This is the big brother of James, Joses<sup>3</sup>, Judas and Simon and all their sisters. Who does he think he is, telling us all what to think and how to behave?

One interesting detail is the phrase "the son of Mary". Usually a man would be described as the son of his father. Now it may be that he was known as "Mary's boy" because Joseph had been dead many years. But it could also be a bit

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<sup>2</sup> The Greek word translated "carpenter" can also mean a builder.

<sup>3</sup> The Greek form of Joseph

of a slur. We don't know how well known the circumstances of Mary's first pregnancy had been all those years ago, but I'd be surprised if there hadn't been some gossip at the time about Joseph not being the father. Perhaps the family had lived with that stigma for over 30 years. And Jesus had politely ignored it, and got on with learning his trade from Joseph, so that he could support the family.

## **Facing change**

It seems that it wasn't only the neighbours in Nazareth who found it hard to accept Jesus' huge career change. In chapter 3 Mark tells us that people had reported to Jesus' family that he had done out of his mind<sup>4</sup>. And so Mary and her sons had gone to find him "to restrain him". While he'd been teaching in a house one day, they'd shown up outside and sent a message in to say that they wanted to speak with him. Jesus had looked around at his audience and said "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother<sup>5</sup>". John's gospel also tells us that "not even his brothers believed in him."<sup>6</sup>

I wonder whether you've had the experience of members of your family or friends disapproving of something you did. Maybe they didn't think you'd chosen the right "A" levels, or the right university course or career. Perhaps they didn't like your choice of life partner. As we grow up and make our way in life we make choices and we change, and these

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

<sup>5</sup> Mark 3:31-35

<sup>6</sup> John 7:5

changes aren't always comfortable for those close to us. Perhaps you've experienced it from the other side – you think your sister or brother, your son or daughter chose the wrong career, or married the wrong person. Maybe you were right, but maybe in time you came to realise that people have to make their own choices, and they may get it right or they may get it wrong. My father thought I was wasting my talents going into church ministry. But I think after a while that he accepted that it was what I really wanted to do, and supported me.

Or maybe you've been affected all your life by something that was said to you when you were a child – perhaps a teacher who said you'd never be any good academically, or who labelled you as a trouble-maker – and you lived up to their expectation.

Or maybe becoming a Christian was a change in you that others found hard to accept. Perhaps you've faced ridicule or even been ostracised because of your faith. If you haven't, don't forget that in some cultures people face rejection by their families and even death threats for deciding to follow Jesus.

One of the hardest things in life to face is rejection. We all need to be loved, and we all want to please others to a greater or lesser extent, in order to be able to accept and value ourselves. Some of us are more vulnerable to rejection than others.

### **Finding acceptance**

But you don't need to live the rest of your life under the curse of someone else's negative comments, however

hurtful they may have been. God our loving Father knows us through and through, and still loves and accepts us. He wants us to fulfil our true potential, to develop our gifts and become the people he made us to be – not someone else’s idea of who we are, but the person *he* knows us to be.

In today’s reading we see Jesus suffering rejection, and in the second part of our gospel passage he warns his followers that they would also be rejected. And of course worse was to come, when the leaders of his own people conspired to have him killed, and a crowd called for him to be crucified.

But Jesus himself didn’t reject anyone. People whom others rejected, like tax collectors and prostitutes, found that he treated them with respect and helped them to find dignity and a new purpose in life, so much so that he was nicknamed “friend of sinners” by his enemies.

There is a crisis of identity in our world today, and it manifests itself particularly among our young people: teenage boys who are bullied for not being masculine enough; girls who feel unable to match up to the models of beauty and sexiness that they see in social media, and allow themselves to be abused, or who self-harm, or even seek to change sex<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9106895/ABIGAIL-SHRIERS-investigation-exploding-numbers-girls-wanting-change-sex.html>

## Come to Jesus

Today more than ever, people need to know the love of God. And Jesus was willing to suffer rejection and even death in order that we might know ourselves to be accepted and loved by our Father in heaven. As Isaiah wrote,

<sup>3</sup>He was despised and rejected by others;  
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;  
and as one from whom others hide their faces  
he was despised, and we held him of no account...

<sup>5</sup>But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.

Jesus was not put off his mission by the scorn of others, even the unbelief of his brothers, who later became leaders in the church. He knew that he was loved and called by God, and that assurance enabled him to do what God had called him to do.

We who follow him can have the same assurance that we are loved by God and called to follow his Son. In our turn we need to encourage others, especially the young, to discover their calling and grow into the people that God intends them to be. In our church community everyone should know that they belong and that they will be enabled to grow and develop as disciples of Jesus. May each of us follow God's calling to us and also let him use us to help others to find their calling too.