

## **SERMON ORDINARY 14B 2018**

### **ALL SAINTS BIRKENEHEAD**

In New Zealand we often hear of people who have become successful complain of what is known as 'Tall Poppy Syndrome'. Tall Poppy Syndrome is defined as 'the perceived tendency to discredit or disparage those who have achieved notable wealth or prominence in public life.' We have supposedly seen this of late with some famous writers and directors who have criticised certain parts of New Zealand culture and received a backlash. Eleanor Catton, the author of the Booker prize winning *The Luminaries* famously decried New Zealand as ant-intellectual and received a lot of criticism. More recently Director Taika Waititi claimed that New Zealand has major issues with racism, again receiving a lot of criticism.

We may feel that the criticism is justified in these cases, but there are many other examples where we often have an uneasiness about those who are successful and their displays of success. I've often wondered what this uneasiness is about. Is it because we are generally a hardworking and humble country? Or is it because we are in fact slightly insecure about coming across as bashful? Whatever the answer, there does seem to exist a part of our culture which is reluctant to heap praise and receive it.

In our Gospel this reading this morning we have Jesus in essence being taken down a few pegs by the people of his home village. Or so it would seem. For the first time in Mark's story, Jesus entered his hometown synagogue. His successful activity in neighboring synagogues, like Capernaum, would have led us to expect positive results here as well. Also, the previous healing occurred in the home of a neighboring synagogue leader. These positive results would not continue here.

The audience's "astonishment" at Jesus' "wisdom"-- perhaps a reference to his parables, as some scholars suggest -- would remind us of his first synagogue appearance in which the spectators were "astounded" because "he was teaching them as one with authority unlike the scribes".

On this occasion, however, the amazement immediately turned negative as the crowd vocalized a series of questions that led them to the issue of Jesus' own origins. And, they -- hometown folk -- seemed to know all too well from where he came. If anyone had the right to question Jesus' origins, it should be those who knew him best. Their description of him as "the carpenter," "the son of Mary," ignored any mention of a father figure.

So, they know a lot about his family. This information would be a direct insult on Jesus' character, his honor, in first century culture, hinting at one who was conceived

illegitimately. This type of history, with a fatherless lineage, would be "scandalous" to them. Unlike Matthew and Luke who cleaned it up, Mark did not alter the tradition and include a father as seen in the other Gospels. Rather, the tension between Jesus and his family or hometown was an on-going sub-plot of the story.

Despite the hometown's assessment, Jesus provided an alternative self-designation: "prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown". By referring to himself as a "prophet," he associated himself with a long line of counter-cultural figures within Israel. In the Gospel of Mark, others would also view him in this way.

In an honor/shame society, "prophets" would have received honor. But the traditional wisdom of the age was that this occurred generally in places in which prophets were less familiar. Indeed, as some scholars stress about the cultural mores in antiquity, "honor was a limited good. If someone gained, someone else lost. To be recognized as a 'prophet' in one's own town meant that honor due to other persons and other families was diminished. Claims to more than one's appointed share of honor therefore threatened others and would eventually trigger attempts to cut the claimant down to size. This was the issue at stake.

Perhaps this gives us some insight into New Zealand's Tall Poppy Syndrome. Historically New Zealand was not a wealthy country, and a lot of industry came from

occupations such as farming, building, forestry and mining. New Zealand was very much a working class society. However with the advent of international trade and immigration New Zealand has increasingly become a more affluent and diverse society.

This change of culture has seen a dramatic shift in New Zealand's identity. And one wonders how this has affected faith and the church's place in culture. We often have a romanticised view of Christianity in this country, as if most New Zealander's once attended church. But statistics show that New Zealand church attendance has always been relatively low. In a recent article in the Herald there was discussion about a new survey which stated that 55 per cent of kiwis do not identify with any "main" religion.

One in three identify as Christian, compared to 49 per cent in 2006 Census. Only 16 per cent are churchgoers and out of that only 9 per cent are "active practisers" The article paints a rather bleak picture of Christianity in this country, one that certainly affects our church community. However Professor Peter Lineham, one of New Zealand's foremost authorities on religion, said a secular outlook was hardly new in New Zealand. Since the 1960s the "restraints have been removed on being critical of churches". "In New Zealand, being rude about the churches, nobody bats an eyelid at this any more so there's no sacred protection

anymore." We are in essence without honor in our hometown.

But is it all bleak? Is it all just bad news? Again Peter Lineham says "I think sometimes Christians have more of a hang-up about talking about their faith than people of other faiths. There is an openness to exploring questions of spirituality and faith but just do it in a way which you don't ram it down my throat."

"It's aiming to give churches tools to do something. Will they do it? That's the interesting question. It seems pretty obvious what they're being called on to do is to deal with the bad stuff and to focus on the positive appeal of a religion that focuses on the person of Jesus. I'd be intrigued to see if that happens."

And so Peter Lineham's challenge to put aside a lot of the stuff that hinders people coming to faith such as our attitudes to homosexuality, and concepts of divine judgement and Hell need to be taken seriously. And in turn we should focus more on the life of Jesus and his message of love and reconciliation which we see in today's Gospel. Here Jesus offers us a response to the challenges we face.

For as we come to see, Jesus' rejection in his hometown synagogue did not hinder his mission for long. In fact, it may have given impetus to the commissioning of the twelve for their first assignment. This was why Jesus had chosen

"twelve". Since that point, they were preparing for their own mission. Up to this point in Mark's Gospel Jesus has taught the disciples about the nature of God's reign, providing private instruction for them. He has performed liberating acts for them to witness. Finally, just before he sent them out, the mission experienced unexpected rejection, as a signal of what was to be expected in their work in the movement.

They were now ready to continue the Jesus movement in households. This was not unanticipated, in light of Jesus' own successful activity in the homes surrounding Galilee. In this narrative, Jesus' message and activity in the synagogues had been growing less impressive as the story went on, including the latest rejection today. Synagogues, with established religious traditions and authorities, were not always susceptible to new ideas and activities that may have represented a new move of God!

So, Jesus prepared his disciples for potential rejection. Yet, according to this account, their mission was successful. The disciples, clueless in several earlier stories, apparently understood enough to carry out this new mission effectively.

And so Jesus calls us for our mission, to engage with society in a meaningful and humble way. This mission is for us all as members of Christ's church, as much as it is a challenge to myself. For we all know that such engagement is often

scary and challenging. We face rejection every time we try and share our faith or invite a friend to church. I myself struggle with this. Particularly with the perceptions that people have of the church, especially when they see the dog collar. There is baggage there and it is something we all face together. But we draw strength that those who have gone before us have faced the same challenges.

The Anglican Church still holds a place in the heart of many New Zealanders, who see us as 'their church.' This is to be celebrated. But we also know that as Anglicans we are not always confident in sharing our faith, not wanting to come across as pushy. Again this is one of the aspects which we celebrate. The challenge for us from today's gospel is to find a balance, to at one time offer an open and relaxed approach to membership, but also to take those opportunities to tell others the Good News of the Gospel, that through the life and death of Jesus we know that we are loved and valued, and give thanks for the many gifts that we receive. Let us celebrate that, and invite others to the celebration.