

Weekly Reflections on the Sunday Gospel

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FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Our Scripture passage is from the Gospel of Mark 6:1–6. We read of Jesus returning to His hometown and teaching in the Synagogue. It is a significant moment for Jesus in Mark's Gospel as it marks the last time our Lord enters a Synagogue—a place that previously He had frequented (see Mk 1:21, 1:39, and 3:1–6). The rejection Jesus experiences in this moment has something to teach us as disciples lest we become resistant to the Lord's invitation to conversion in our lives.

One of the reasons Jesus may have encountered difficulty in His hometown is because He acted differently from what people of His time expected of a prophet. It seems that the people were aware of our Lord's "mighty deeds" that had been accomplished up to this point in the Gospel. These mighty deeds would include both His teaching and healing ministry. However, Jesus exercised this ministry in a way that troubled many religious people of His time (see the inclusion of Gentiles, women, and the "unclean" as members in the new family of God). When Jesus came to His hometown, He did so because He wanted those closest to Him to share in the inclusive Kingdom of God that He was establishing. However, many people did not want to be included in that Kingdom when they saw who else was already part of it! Sometimes we can approach our faith life in the same way and condition our association with Jesus on how well the Lord fulfills our agenda and expectations. However, that is not how the relationship of faith works. Jesus did not come to Earth so that He could be like us—but so that we could become like Him! Sometimes we want our Lord's presence and attention (like the people of His hometown), but we don't want to accept the changes of life and attitude that He asks us to undertake in order to remain in a committed relationship with Him.

How can people today have such strong expectations of Jesus that they end up turning away from Him when He doesn't fulfill those expectations?

When do you find it tempting to decide your participation in a parish ministry based on the other people who are involved?

How does the phrase, "Jesus did not come to earth so that He could be like us—but so that we could become like Him" challenge you?

The other reason Jesus encountered resistance among the people of His hometown was because of His ordinariness. They not only knew Jesus and were familiar with Him but they knew Him to be from an unexceptional background (son of a carpenter and a member of an ordinary family). He was not part of the educated class who had the freedom and skills to dedicate Himself to the study of the Law. The Gospel of Luke relates that Herod actually hoped Jesus would perform some amazing miracles, demonstrations of power, or other extraordinary feats—but the Lord didn't do that (see Lk 23:8). Nor was Jesus someone who was regarded as outstanding during His years as a child. It is precisely the ordinariness of Jesus that made it difficult for His hometown to accept that He was capable of great deeds. Great people in the ancient world were somehow known to be outstanding even from the moment of their births. The Scriptures tell us very little about Jesus'

life as a child. (It is true that the second century texts, *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and the *Protoevangelium of James*, provided non-biblical stories about the childhood of Jesus. These narrations tried to satisfy the curiosity of early Christians who wanted to hear more about the deeds of Christ as a child. The Christian leaders of the early church easily disregarded these stories as an attempt to present Jesus more as a Greek hero rather than as the Eternal Word living among us.) Sometimes we expect God to act only in very extraordinary ways in our lives, yet the Lord is most often present in amazingly ordinary ways. The people of Jesus' hometown wanted the Lord to prove to them that He was "special", but He didn't do that. He asked them to accept that God is present in the ordinary and to choose to respond to that presence. Jesus did not force people to accept Him or convince them of His divine nature. Sometimes we can find it easy to overlook the presence of God in the ordinary events and moments of daily life because we are looking for the extraordinary instead. This passage is a challenge for us to look at familiar things in a new way. Sometimes, too, people can experience similar difficulties of faith when the Church and individual disciples act in ordinary ways. This difficulty of faith is especially true when mistakes are made or situations of human weakness show forth on an institutional level.

When has a person of ordinary background and training shocked you with an extraordinary ability and what was your reaction?

How can we be tempted to dismiss excellent ministry opportunities because we are looking for something "better" or "more special"?

What qualities or virtues do you think the people of Jesus' hometown needed in order to accept the Lord?

How do you experience the presence of God in ordinary ways?

Some people say, "Seeing is believing", but this passage invites us to reconsider the process such that "Believing is seeing". If you knew that God would manifest Himself to you today in ten ordinary ways, how might that change the way you approach the ordinary situations you will face?

These difficulties caused the people to be "scandalized" by Jesus. Literally, they were "tripped up" in their ability to accept the Lord. This difficulty accepting Jesus seems to have included those closest to Him as our Lord indicates that a prophet is not without honor except "...among his own relatives". Mark has already introduced us to the challenge of faith posed to those closest to Jesus in Mark 3:20–21 and 31–35. This inclusion of Jesus' closest relatives in those who must make a decision about Him reminds us that discipleship is a personal conviction and that each person must make the choice to accept God in Jesus on our Lord's terms. If Jesus' family are to be His disciples, and they will be, then it will be because they have made that decision just as we must make that decision.

The passage then goes on to tell us that Jesus was unable to do any mighty deeds aside from curing a few sick people. It is not that Jesus needed people's faith in order for Him to be capable of mighty deeds; rather, mighty deeds had a purpose, and where there was no openness to receive God on God's terms, or where the very display of mighty deeds would become a further difficulty in accepting Jesus, then the Lord chose not to work those deeds. Mighty deeds are always meant to be an invitation to discipleship and not a cause of difficulty or scandal in our discipleship! Jesus never performed deeds to prove Himself or force people's acceptance and belief. When the people of His hometown closed their hearts to Jesus, they also closed themselves to the action of

God. Some people, however, were open to accepting Jesus, and for them He did perform mighty deeds of healing (see Mk 6:5).

Who is someone you think is close to Jesus today, and how can you learn more about their decision of faith in the Lord?

What do you think would have been the result if Jesus had performed mighty deeds for the people of His hometown?

When has a mighty deed of God led you to deeper faith?

One final comment should be made about this passage because it contains the phrase regarding the brothers (James, Joses, Judas, and Simon) and the sisters of Jesus. There is a good deal written on this topic in both Catholic and non-Catholic Scripture commentaries. The question is not whether Jesus had brothers and sisters but what the term “brothers and sisters” means and whether those brothers and sisters were also children of Mary. Catholics believe that Mary maintained perpetual virginity throughout her life and so they interpret the “brothers and sisters” of Jesus to be either half-brothers and half-sisters or cousins. Evidence in the early Church does provide basis for such an interpretation. First, the belief in Mary’s perpetual virginity can be traced to the earliest times of Christianity. Second, Mark 6:17 uses the term “brother” to refer to the half-brothers (Herod and Philip) who were Herod’s children from two different mothers. Third, the use of the terms “brother” and “sister” for other relatives in the Jewish context was also explained by the first century historian Flavius Josephus.^[1] Fourth, if Mary did have other children, there should have been no reason for Jesus to entrust her to the care of the Beloved Disciple at the foot of the Cross (see Jn 19:27). These factors may not definitively settle the question but do demonstrate that the Catholic doctrine of Mary’s perpetual virginity is both reasonable and historically founded. One of the reasons Joseph is usually depicted in Christian art as older than Mary is due to an ancient tradition that Joseph had other children from a previous marriage, and that accounts for the mention of the brothers and sisters of Jesus in this passage. It should be remembered that this Gospel passage mentions the family of Jesus, not to generate biblical debates, but to demonstrate how ordinary and well-known Jesus was to the people of His hometown.

When we allow ourselves to become sidelined in our faith by relatively minor issues then we are distracted from paying attention to the most important things. It’s important not to let such a distraction deter us in our lives as disciples. The topic of Jesus’ family is only one example of the many ways in which we can allow issues that are peripheral to the person of Jesus to distract us from focusing intently on the Lord.

What issues or topics in Church life or Scripture can distract people from focusing intently on following Jesus today?

If you had to identify the three most important teachings of faith for a Christian disciple to focus on, what would be those teachings?

What are methods you can use to keep your conversations of faith focused when they become distracted?

^[1] Flavius Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae*, Book 20, Chap. 9.