

This morning's sermon has been prepared for us by Bishop Michael Pryse. It is based on the Gospel lesson for today in the Revised Common Lectionary; Mark 6:1-13.

Yesterday afternoon, Bishop Susan Johnson presided and Bishop Pryse preached at our concluding worship service with the approximately 400 delegates and visitors who have gathered in Waterloo, Ontario to participate in the Synod Assembly. This morning those delegates will worship in Kitchener-Waterloo Conference congregations. Bishop Pryse writes:

Grace and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It's a privilege to be able to be part of your worship services this morning and to bring you greetings from the pastors, diaconal ministers and lay delegates who are with me today in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario as we conclude our 14th biennial Synod Assembly. I hope that in this small way you will feel some sense of connection to the wider church family of which you are a part - a family we have experienced quite tangibly this week through three days of shared worship, study, prayer and debate.

During the few brief years of his public ministry, Jesus spoke to people about a great many things. But one thing he never seemed to tire of describing was "the kingdom." The kingdom of heaven is like a sower who went out to sow; like a woman looking for a coin; like a tiny but mighty mustard seed. Jesus' descriptions of the kingdom typically use the simplest and most common of image and always stand in contradiction to what his listeners expect or want to hear.

We shouldn't be surprised by that. Jesus himself stood as a complete contradiction to the conventional wisdom of what, or who, the Messiah would be. In this morning's Gospel lesson we read that the people of his hometown were astounded at his teachings in the synagogue. They are amazed at the reputation he has garnered for himself. But experience has taught them well. They know better than to trust that such power in both word and deed could come from one who is so ordinary, so unconventional, so common! "For heaven's sake, this is Jesus, Mary's boy. Didn't he used to help out in his dad's carpenter shop? His brothers and sisters still live here!"

Jesus is not what you would expect to receive if you called central casting and ask for a messiah to be delivered! A conventional God would send a conventional messiah to redeem his people. But our God is not a conventional God! God could have provided a messiah who would meet the people's expectations, but chose not to. Rather than sending a king, a scholar, a sage or even a soldier, he sent one of their own, a commoner, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary and Joseph, the brother of James, Joses, Judas, Simon and some unnamed sisters; and the people flocked to him – but not in Nazareth!

It's been said that the truest test of faith is whether it will let anything stand in its way. And by this measure, those who Jesus encounters beyond Nazareth in the first chapters of Mark's gospel have great faith, indeed. A man with an unclean spirit, a leper, a paralytic, a man with a withered hand and another who is possessed by unclean spirits. In last Sunday's gospel lesson we heard the story of the healings of Jairus's daughter and the

woman with an unstoppable hemorrhage. None of them will be dissuaded. They want what Jesus has and they will do anything to get it.

Think about it! Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, has a reputation and a position to uphold and it would probably be better for him to not be seen talking to Jesus, much less inviting him home. But Jairus stands in front of a crowd of onlookers and pleads with Jesus until he gets his way.

The woman with the flow of blood is supposed to avoid all human contact. She has no business reaching through the press of bodies to grasp Jesus' cloak but she won't be deterred. She pushes her way through, stretches her arm out as Jesus passes and is healed on the spot! She – like so many of those needy ones who chased after our Lord – refused to take no for an answer.

These people are driven – by faith – to cross boundaries. But so is Jesus, an ordinary man who acts in extraordinary ways. He's willing to bend or change the rules, going against all accepted convention for the sake of the kingdom. After having just returned from a retreat in the mountains with his disciples, Jesus returns to the relative safety of home territory and right away he's stirring up trouble! The crowds pour into the village and his neighbours are aghast. Earlier in Mark's gospel they claim that he is possessed, that he has the spirit of Beelzebub in him! Regardless, we see that this is a Saviour who refuses to be domesticated or contained and the people stream to him!

One wonders where those faith-fuelled seekers are to be found today! I know I haven't found many of them pushing and elbowing their way into our churches! Could it be that when they visit churches bearing this Jesus' name – they find that he's not there?

Not many people are going to break a sweat chasing down a stained glass, safe, tame, domesticated Jesus; a central-casting Jesus! That's not what they're craving! What they want – what they need – and what their faith is driving them toward is the one who Kate Layzer describes as “the genuinely undomesticated Jesus of the Gospels; the Jesus who loves fiercely and speaks sharply – who looks us straight in the eye and speaks to us of God's uncompromising love, who startles us with more forgiveness than we think we deserve, who challenges us to extend the same love to others. They want the Jesus who makes them cry in church – not out of sadness, but because after long years of trying everything else, they've brushed up against him and felt something inside begin to heal, and love reawakening when they thought it was gone for good!”

A stained-glass Jesus can't do this for us. A conventional Jesus; a conventional messiah, can't do this for us. And that, I think is very good but challenging news for you and me and for a church that is made up of some very unlikely agents of redemption, a church made up of folks who, though remarkably ordinary, have the capacity to act in extraordinary ways!

Jesus' contemporaries and neighbours were not able, or perhaps willing, to accept that one of their own could be capable of the extraordinary. Family should be safe, comfortable, predictable and oh so ordinary. They had forgotten that God has always drawn the

extraordinary from out of the ordinary. An old married couple named Abraham and Sarah, a homeless widow named Ruth, a despised family runt named Jacob, a simple shepherd boy by the name of David! All ordinary folk who by God's grace were inspired to live big and to do big things in support of the reign of God.

And all of them were opposed. Every one of them, like Jesus, had to fight against voices that told them to stay small and live small. Don't rock the boat. And the same thing happens in faith communities today. We're not much different from those folks in Nazareth. We're not quite sure we want this Jesus who challenges and pushes; this Jesus who changes things; this Jesus who won't be what we want or expect him to be; this Jesus who cannot, and will not leave us as he has found us!

And so we avert our eyes and bury our noses in the hymnbook. We go through the motions and half-engage, happy to coast along with what is easy and comfortable. We blithely ignore the life-giving and world-shaking presence of a Saviour of who dares come to us in the ordinary stuff of life; in water, wine and bread, in neighbour and in need.

Annie Dillard puts it this way. "Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares;

they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may awake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.”

For our church to grow, for the faith to spread, we need to deepen our roots of faith and take our ministry out of the safety of our church buildings and into the world in extraordinary ways! That’s how we will truly be Covenant People: In Mission for Others. That’s why our National Bishop is calling us into spiritual renewal; calling us back to those primary Christian disciplines of praying, reading, worshiping, studying, serving, giving and telling. People need to see and meet Jesus; not only through our words, but through the ways we engage and interact in the world. We need to throw off the shackles of a too-domesticated religion and throw ourselves into a life of faith, into the life of a kingdom that refuses to be domesticated; a life that is never predictable and never safe.

An old saying tells us that ships that remain in the harbour are safe ships. But that isn’t what ships are made for! The same is true for the ship that is the church. It can remain safe and comfortable in the harbour and disciples can remain safe, locked away behind closed doors. But that’s not what this ship has been made for either and that’s not what disciples are made for.

God has a crafted a remarkable record of accomplishing amazing things through unconventional, unexpected agents! The same can be true both in, and for us, today! Remarkable and miraculously good things truly can come from Nazareth! Don’t ever doubt it! AMEN.