

Trinity 4 SS Martha & Mary's, Leuven
Mark 6:1-13

An invitation to be co-healers with God

One of the most interesting people I met when I was living and working in Baghdad was a guy called Bassam, who was about my age. He had just finished his undergraduate degree, at University in Baghdad and was relieved that he'd managed to get it done before the American-British invasion in 2003.

We met on my first trip to Iraq. We were introduced by someone I was working with. We soon became friends. Bassam was desperate to get out of Iraq to pursue further studies in America or Europe, which he did! I was in a tiny way involved as I was able to help get his application papers to the right people inside the Green Zone in war-torn Baghdad at a time when it was very difficult for Iraqis to actually have much contact with the powers inside the Green Zone.

Completed the Masters in Architecture.

We re-connected about ten years later over coffee when he visited London with his wife. It was amazing to see him, couldn't believe his story - he'd got out, survived and made a life for himself. But when I enquired after his family in Baghdad and how things were going there his smile faded. Bassam then told me about how he had gone back to Baghdad after completing his fullbright scholarship in America. He was this bright, energetic young man who wanted to pour his energy, his skills and his learning back into the re-building of his city. But it wasn't that straight forward.

Bassam was one of five children, most of his siblings had stayed put and looked after his parents, both of whom were suffering from PTSD following the war. His best friend, also a brilliant young dreamer, had chosen not to leave Baghdad when Bassam did. He felt he needed to stay and help fight the oppressor (whether that be remnants of the Baath party or the Americans).

Bassam returned home excited by the prospect of helping with the reconstruction of Baghdad. In his studies he had particularly focussed on building from the dust, neighbourhood regeneration after disaster or war.

It turned out neither his family nor potential employers were that pleased to see him. In his mind he'd been away to get educated and to acquire skills that he could then offer back to his native country in its time of desperate need. But his family, even his best friend weren't interested in hearing about what he'd been doing in America or what he now had to offer. For them he was simply good old Bassam, who had always been a bit of a dreamer, wrote poetry and could sit and talk for hours about nothing much. The sooner he could slot back into that role the better.

Offended by what they felt was a kind of superiority he'd acquired while he'd been away. They didn't want to hear about all the things he'd discovered and they had no interest in helping him find a job so that he could 'give back'.

And the architects firms also had no place for Bassam and his bright ideas. Without the support or cooperation of friends, family or place of work it became impossible for Bassam to remain in Baghdad. He couldn't get started with a job, or settle with the people he loved most if they refused to acknowledge the person he had become and simply wanted him to be good old Bassam from five years ago.

He knew that what he had to offer would be welcomed elsewhere, so with heavy heart he ended up leaving Baghdad and eventually settling in Spain, where he was living when we re-connected over coffee in London.

Prophets are not without honour except in their home town and among their own kin.

You can also see it from the perspective of Jesus' friends and family - he'd left them and now coming back expected them to offer some kind of hero's welcome and to listen to his instruction and enthuse about his mission. I'm sure at least some of us know what that feels like. Who does she/he think he is coming back after being away and expecting us to just accept this newly exalted status.

To these people Jesus is the carpenter, the Son of Mary. That's how they knew him for 30 years; he's only been gone a comparatively short time, but he seems to have changed so much. It's not just that they reject him; they are scandalised by the name he is making for himself. And the distressing thing is that without them Jesus cannot perform the acts of power that they've heard so much about. He can't even achieve what everyone says he's been doing elsewhere.

Here Jesus is rejected by his closest friends and family. As a result he leaves, makes a break with his hometown and takes up the itinerant mission to the villages with his disciples.

Part of Mark's project in writing down the good news about God in Jesus Christ was to encourage his audience to identify with the disciples. That invitation extends to us as we are called to judge our own historical existence by the story of Jesus. The theologian Ched Myers talks about the historical elasticity of the Gospel which stops it from being just a record of past events and invites us as reader to enter into the story.

When Jesus calls the disciples he calls the reader; when he argues with them or despairs over their unbelief he is contending with the reader. This Gospel is laid out in such a way that it's not only Peter, James and the others who must struggle to follow, but whosoever has ears to hear. As we hear tonight's story we are called to recognise our part in the action.

Jesus could do no deed of power in Nazareth because a miracle requires faith and he found no faith in Nazareth. The work of God comes through relationship. The people he went back to visit didn't believe he could do it. Jesus needs our faith to achieve God's work. Just as Bassam could not begin his architectural projects in Baghdad without the confidence and cooperation of his family and colleagues, Jesus cannot perform God's work in Nazareth. We are instrumental to God's acts of power on earth.

What is so sad about this story is that his family's unbelief and choosing to be offended by him cost *them*, they lost out on the opportunity to find abundant life.

God does not move us around like chess pieces on a board, or puppets on a string, God works *with* us to fulfil God's project. We are active participants in the mission of God, not bystanders. And so when on occasion Jesus is confronted by people who do not want to take part in the mission - whether that be the inhabitants of his hometown or people that he and his disciples encounter along the way who do not want to hear what they have to say - the only course of action is to shake the dust off and move on to a place where there are people who do want to hear and who do want to take part in the mission of God.

But we the privilege of hindsight when we enter into the Gospel drama. We know where this is going. We are part of this wonderful dynamic of the Trinity. That's what baptism and the Eucharist are about. It's not just Father, Son and Holy Spirit - it's us too! Our vows at baptism and our receiving of the sacrament of the Eucharist week in week out are reminders that we are tangibly involved in the action of the Trinity; it is a cooperative project. Our most recent and vivid example of that is the ordination of Sarah-Jane in Ghent yesterday. As the Bishop prayed for Sarah-Jane he called down the Holy Spirit upon her for the office and work of a deacon in God's church. Another sacrament that points to the cooperative nature of the work of God. As an ordained deacon Sarah-Jane has been anointed to be a vessel for God's redeeming love. All of the baptised have this calling, but yesterday Sarah-Jane vowed to do this in a particular kind of way.

When at the preparation of the Eucharist I add the water to the wine, I pray quietly: by the mixing of this water and wine may we share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity. It is in the mixing of human and divine embodied through the Sacrament of the Eucharist that God is at work in the world. We are enablers of God's mission.

The woman with the flow of blood in the Gospel we heard last Sunday was inextricably involved in Jesus' healing of her condition. She touched him. Power left him and she was healed. Her belief, in contrast to the unbelief Jesus encounters in Nazareth, enabled her to become a co-healer with God, a partner in God's project of bringing wholeness and healing to a broken world.

In the Gospel we listen to the story of Jesus' life, the question is whether we have the ears to hear and the faith to accept the invitation God the Trinity extends to us to become partners and co-healers, in the scandalous message of healing love that God offers to all humanity.