**The Offensive Gospel**

Text: Mark 6:1-13

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** John 15:18-27; Mark 6:1-13

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 164, 139, 371, 407, 525

**Series:** The gospel of Mark (#15)

**Theme:** Firstly, Jesus was rejected in his hometown of Nazareth where the lack of people’s faith resulted in fewer miracles, He then sent His disciples out in pairs to proclaim the gospel and perform miracles with His authority, warning them that they too would not be received in some places.

**Proposition:** When you proclaim the gospel some people will be offended by the good news that you bring.

**Introduction**

The #MeToo movement seeks to make public people’s painful experiences of sexual abuse or harassment. The actions of those who prey on the vulnerable are understandably very offensive. Publicly calling out the objectionable behaviour and messages of people and groups that harm others can be a very good thing. In today’s culture, if a person, their actions, views and words are deemed to be offensive they may be ‘cancelled’ – that is rejected by social groups from which they are then excluded.

However, there is a problem here. If aspects of the culture itself are offensive to God, if what is good is called evil and what is evil is determined to be good then a good message may be rejected and those who bring that message may be rejected by, that is ‘cancelled’ from, society. The gospel is good news for a bad world, it is therefore not surprising that it is an offensive message for some.

The Apostle Paul expressed this abiding truth when he wrote these words to the church in Corinth: **“***we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God*” (1 Cor 1:23-24). As you may know, the Greek word translated ‘stumbling block’ here is where the English term ‘scandalous’ is derived from. A scandalous action or message causes public outrage as a perceived offense against morality or law. Such scandalous acts or words shock and upset people.

In Mark’s gospel so far, in chapter 5, we have seen the way in which Jesus was approached by two people in need: synagogue ruler Jairus and a woman with a chronic illness. Both believed in Jesus and gladly accepted the help He gave them. In contrast, as we come to chapter 6, we see how the people of Nazareth ‘took offense’ at Jesus. The Greek word here is the ‘scandalous’ term used by Paul to describe the gospel. Jesus and His gospel message were a ‘stumbling block’ for his fellow Nazarenes, who lacked faith in Him. Similarly, the call to ‘*repent and believe the gospel*’ (Mark 1:15) would be rejected by some others who lacked faith in the towns and villages where Jesus sent His disciples as His representatives in word and deed.

Today as we focus on the offensive gospel, we are reminded that when we proclaim the gospel some people will be offended by the good news that we bring. Our two points this morning mirror the two parts of our text:

1. Firstly, ‘the Master was rejected’ – verses 1-6
2. Secondly, ‘the disciples will be rejected’ – verses 7-13
3. **The Master was rejected (6:1-6)**

I remember an occasion in my previous congregation when Jenny and I invited all the elders and deacons and their wives to come to our place for dinner. We thought that it would be good for everyone to get to know each other better. As the dinner conversation progressed, some of the men (who were in their 50s) started to talk about their shared history in Cadets and youth group; even including times when they had got into fist fights with each other! Perhaps later than it should have done, it dawned on me that these people had known each other for a very long time. They were extremely familiar with one another. The way they related together as grown men in some ways reflected their shared childhood experiences. They still remembered each other’s past faults and shortcomings.

The man Jesus grew up in the small Galilean community of Nazareth. Unlike all of us, He did absolutely nothing wrong in His childhood. We know this both from His perfect character revealed in Scripture (e.g. Col 1:15) and from gospel writer Luke’s words that He “*increased in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and man*” (Luke 2:52). Mark records at the start of chapter 6 that Jesus returned to His hometown of Nazareth – which was about 32 kms from His Galilean ministry base in Capernaum (Matt 4:13).

In 1st century synagogue worship anyone present and approved by the ruler or rulers of the synagogue could be encouraged to preach and teach. On this occasion, Jesus was the preacher-teacher. In the parallel account in Luke’s gospel (4:16-30), we learn that Jesus first read from Isaiah 61:1-2 and said, ‘*today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*’. Mark records that those who heard Jesus teach there were astonished, asking many questions: ‘*Where did this man get these things?*’ ‘What is the wisdom given to him?’ ‘*How are such mighty works done by his hands?*’ ‘*Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon?*’

The words which Jesus spoke were extraordinary. The reaction of those who heard Him speak in Nazareth, were initially the same as in Capernaum, where Mark records that “*they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes*” (1:22). At age twelve Jesus had already demonstrated a profound understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures that amazed his learned listeners in the Jerusalem Temple (Luke 2:46-47). Notice how those Nazarene synagogue listeners recognised the astounding wisdom of Christ and the ‘mighty works’ that He had been performing in His public ministry as He healed many people.

What they struggled to understand was how someone as seemingly ordinary as Jesus could do what He was doing. They knew him to be a local ‘carpenter’. The underlying Greek word here refers to a skilled workman who ‘brings forth’ or makes an object. Today we might use the word ‘craftsman’ or perhaps ‘certified builder’ or even ‘qualified tradie’. The local townsfolk knew that Jesus was very much like most of them; in their eyes an ordinary individual not formally trained as a religious leader. In fact, they knew His human family well. Four brothers and one sister are mentioned, together with His mother Mary. It has been suggested that Joseph had died by this time. There is no explicit Scriptural evidence for this view, although the omission of Joseph’s name from verse three is consistent with his earlier death.

Mark records that because of their familiarity with Jesus, the townsfolk in the synagogue ‘*took offense at him*’ (v3b). The Greek word translated ‘offense’ was originally used in Bible times to describe a piece of wood that kept a trap open for animals. The word came to mean any entanglement of the foot. In Scripture it is used metaphorically to describe any ‘stumbling block’ placed in a person’s way which trips them up.

For the people of Nazareth, their familiarity with Jesus had ‘brought contempt’. They had allowed themselves to be ensnared by the sin of rejecting Christ whom they thought they knew well, despite abundant evidence that He is far from ordinary. They ‘stumbled over’ the reality of His true identity. Perhaps it was a little like what we today would call ‘tall poppy syndrome’ where exceptional people are looked down upon by others because they ‘want to cut them back down to size’

In response to their stumbling over Him, Jesus said: "*A prophet is not without honour, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household*." (6:4). Remember that earlier, Mark had recorded how the human family of Jesus were saying ‘*He is out of His mind*’ (Mark 3:21). It is painful to be rejected by your own community, as Jesus was in Nazareth. Luke records that the townspeople rose up and drove him out of Nazareth with the intention of killing Him. As He went to the cross, all His disciples would reject Him. At Calvary, God the Father would reject Him who bore the sins of many (Mark 15:34). How accurately Isaiah prophesised about the Christ yet to come: “*He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not*” (Isa 53:3).

Remarkably, because of the unbelief of the Nazarenes, Jesus ‘*could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them*’ (v5). We should not understand these words to mean that Jesus was unable to perform miraculous works in His hometown, but rather that the absence of faith in Him resulted in much less exercise of His almighty healing power. Notice the stark contrast with the faith of Jairus and of the unnamed woman in the previous passage. Remember that Jesus said to the woman: "*Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease*." (Mark 5:34). Faith is the instrument by which the benefits of Christ are ordinarily given to those who believe. In Nazareth, Jesus ‘*marvelled because of their unbelief*’ (v6). This contrasts starkly with the time when a Gentile centurion exercised faith, and Jesus ‘marvelled’ and said ‘*Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith*’ (Matt 8:10).

Today many people have ideas about who Jesus is; a good person, a teacher of morals, a mythical figure whose name is to be used like a swear word. Their familiarity with partial or false information about the identity of Jesus can breed contempt and rejection of the gospel. They stumble over His true identity. Brothers and sisters, we, as disciples of Christ, should not be surprised by this reaction, which brings us to our second point:

1. **The Disciples will be rejected (6:7-13)**

The twelve disciples had been following Jesus since He had called them. They had been observers of His ministry, hearers of His teaching, but had not been active themselves in proclaiming the gospel. We see now how this changed when Jesus began to send them out two by two (v7). The significance of the disciples ministering the gospel in pairs is grounded in the Biblical principle that testimony in a court of law is to be established by at least two witnesses (Num 35:30; Deut 17:6; 19:15; Matt 18:16; John 8:17; 2 Cor 13:1; 1 Tim 5:19; Heb 10:28).

Jesus authorized his disciples to be His representatives in both His Word and power. Their ministry was to be an extension of His own. This was an established pattern in the ancient world (and also today) where a person is sent out in place of the one who commissions him or her. We see this same approach today also. For example, our New Zealand Government sends out ambassadors to other countries to represent our national interests there. When I preach from this pulpit, I do not do so merely as an individual, but I do so as one officially commissioned by the church to preach. The handshake by the Elder of service before and after the service symbolises this. In my ministry work I report back to the elders about my activities when we meet every month. Similarly we see later in verse 30 of chapter 6 that the disciples reported back to Jesus: “*The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught*”.

Notice that the disciples are here called ‘apostles’ which means ‘sent ones’. Here the twelve disciples were sent, and empowered by Jesus. Jesus gave some specific instructions to His disciples in Galilee which are not a general prescription for all Christian ministry. He instructed them to take only a staff with them and to wear sandals. They were not to take bread, a bag, or money nor to wear two tunics. The significance of the second garment – which was generally worn at night to keep warm - was that they were to find lodging in people’s homes, not to sleep rough outdoors. They were to rely on the hospitality of people in the settlements they would visit on their journeys.

This was ultimately a call to be dependent on God for all their food and shelter. When someone opened their home to the visiting disciples, they were to stay there until they departed the village. They were not to dishonour their hosts by accepting ‘a better offer’ later; perhaps in a more comfortable or wealthier home than the one they were first invited into.

As Jesus prepared His disciples for their missionary work, He warned them that they, like He, at times would be rejected by the people to whom they brought the gospel. In some villages no hospitality would be offered to them, and people would not listen to the gospel message they proclaimed. There was a custom in Judaism that when pious Jews travelled outside of Israel, they would carefully remove any dust from alien lands in which they had travelled. The idea was to symbolically separate themselves from the pollution of ritually unclean gentile nations.

As the disciples travelled in their ministry, they would be the Lord’s agents in ‘sifting and gathering’ the true people of God. Some people would accept their proclamation on Christ’s behalf to repent, other would reject them and their message. Gospel writer John records the warning words of Christ to His disciples in the Upper Room before He went to the cross: “*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you*” (John 15:18). “*Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you*” (John 15:20).

Our text in Mark chapter 6 records what we could describe as a short ‘excursion’ of the twelve disciples as they travelled from settlement to settlement proclaiming that people should repent and healing people in the name of Jesus. Later, after the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Christ, eleven of these twelve would be faithful witnesses who proclaimed the gospel ‘*in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth*’ (Acts 1:8). They would fearlessly speak the gospel to many as they travelled widely, some of whom would be greatly offended and stumble over the person and work of Christ Jesus.

So it is for us today also, brothers and sisters in the Lord. There is constant pressure from our secular society for us to ‘keep our mouths shut’ about Christ and to make sure that we practice our religion privately, not causing offense to others. Surely, who would want to risk being ‘cancelled by society’?

Here it is important to remember that whilst the gospel may be offensive to some, we are most definitely not to be offensive ourselves! Peter expresses this truth when he writes: “*But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame*“ (1 Peter 3:14-16). Explaining the hope we have in Christ, revealing the faith we have in our hearts to others, is not to be done in an offensive way, but with ‘*gentleness and respect*’.

If we are faithful in this and yet we are still rejected/’cancelled’ by others, then so be it. We are following the pathway of our Saviour, who was more despised by others than we will ever be. Whilst some will reject the message of the gospel which we bring, others, by God’s grace will accept Christ and we can rejoice with the angels in heaven over one sinner who repents! (Luke 15:10). The gospel is offensive to some, but it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16). It is good news that we are tasked by our Lord and Saviour to proclaim! What a privilege, what a responsibility, what a joy, even when we as the messengers are, at times, rejected as Christ was.

AMEN.