

"WHEN GOD BECOMES REAL"

September 24, 1989

TEXT: Mark 6:5 "And he could do no mighty work there."

This morning's Gospel recalls a situation so incredible that we can hardly believe it. How often you and I have been moved by the words of Jesus. Even in print, as impersonal as that is, what he said is able to touch both our minds and our hearts, leaving us in awe at their wisdom and their beauty. And I would guess that most of us, at one time or other, have thought how wonderful it would be to hear them from Jesus' own lips. Think of it. Not only to visit the Holy Land, to walk where Jesus walked, to stand in the streets of Nazareth or on the hill where he was crucified, but to see his face, to hear his words, to touch his hand? The very prospect sends shivers up and down my spine.

But here we have a story of rejection and disbelief. Compared to our imaginings, what happened at Nazareth seems almost unthinkable. Yet it must be true, for it's hardly the sort of thing the early church would ever have invented. And we find it, not only here in Mark, but in Matthew and Luke as well.

There was Jesus, by now a famous Rabbi, complete with entourage of disciples, visiting the town in which he grew up. It is the Sabbath, and he goes to the local synagogue, as was his custom. And, as usually happened when a visitor was in the congregation, he was invited to read the scripture and to say something about it. Can you imagine that? Jesus, himself, guest preacher. What excitement! What power! Yet that is not what happened at all. The only real excitement was in their anger. And apparently there was no power of any kind. In what must certainly be one of the saddest verses in all the Bible, we read, "And he [that is Jesus] could do no mighty work there . . ." (Mark 6:5) That's probably what Mark wrote although some later scribe tried to soften it by adding, "except that he laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them." Clearly, the thrust of the story is that even Jesus could not do anything much because of their unbelief.

But the question still remains, "Why?" Why didn't they believe? What was there that so blinded them to the Glory in their midst. And, more to the point, what is there within us, in our reaction to the promised presence of Christ which blinds us also? What is there in us that keeps even Jesus from bringing power to our lives and to the world in which we live?

Let's look at them first. Their own comments give us a clue to what their problem was. They said, "Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joseph, and Judas, and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" Apparently they could not accept the thought that God might really be at work in one so familiar to them. How can anyone this ordinary, this familiar, be sent from God? Is it really possible that the Almighty, Himself, would come to us in the form of a neighbor? Give us something spectacular and miraculous, and just maybe we'll believe it. But, really now, a neighbor? An ordinary carpenter? They were, you see, the victims of narrow thinking and little minds. They couldn't see Jesus as God's Messiah because they could not believe that God would work that way. They were not even open to that possibility.

Of course, they had heard God's promise in the words of Isaiah, "Behold, I am doing a new thing" (Isaiah 43:19) But they did not really think He meant it. They did not even want Him to. There is always something threatening about the new, so comfortable about the old. There is in humankind a natural timidity, as Shakespeare said, that "makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others we know not of." So they missed the Power and the Glory Jesus offered. And he could do no mighty work there.

Even more importantly, they may not have wanted God to come that close, may not have wanted Him to be that real. It is one thing to talk about God in the past tense --or in the future, for that matter. To read about what God did in Egypt, or on Sinai, or on Golgotha. And it is also easy to speculate about what God may do some day off in the distant, and therefore, safe future. But to think in terms of that same God, alive, real, here, now; that is something else again. Consider, for instance, the Israelite's reaction when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. In the book of Exodus we read: "Now, when all the people perceived the thunderings and the lightnings and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled; and they stood afar off and said to Moses, 'You speak to us and we will hear, but let not God speak to us, lest we die.'" Or, as the letter to the Hebrews says, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

Here, then, is the heart of the matter. No doubt those people at Nazareth had a very human disdain for the ordinary. No doubt they found it hard to believe that the Creator of the universe could really be speaking through someone so familiar as their old friend and neighbor. And no doubt they were human enough to reject what he said because it was new and not just the past warmed over. Many a church has stumbled and fallen over the words, "We've never done it that way before." But why were they so angry? Why frightened?

Was it not because if Jesus really was who he said he was, then that safely distant God of the past --or of the future-- had suddenly become uncomfortably real? Were they not acting out exactly what their ancestors had said to Moses at Sinai, "Let Moses speak to us, the Torah speak to us, let the rabbis speak to us, but let not God speak to us, lest we die."?

And are we not as human as they? How often God may have tried to speak to us. In a worship service. In a film or a novel. In the headlines of the morning paper, or through a neighbor or a co-worker. Who knows how often God has reached out to touch our lives, to bring healing and wholeness to us through some process of change only to have been rejected by us. How many times has God been prevented from doing some mighty work through us because we could not accept Him in something ordinary or unexpected? And, if so, is it not perhaps because we, too, like things the way they are? Because, while we find it comfortable enough to talk about what God did 2,000 years ago, it is threatening to consider what He may be up to today? May we not also be saying in effect, "Let the Bible talk to us, let the scholars talk to us, let the preacher talk to us (as long as he's careful what he says) but let not God talk to us, lest we die."

I hope not, because such fears are totally unfounded. The Good News of the Gospel is that when God comes to us He always comes for good. The prophet, Jeremiah, wrote, "For I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." (Jeremiah 29:11) The Psalmist adds, in the words of this morning's call to worship, "Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people." (Psalm 85:8) And Jesus brought it all into focus when he said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10)

But even Jesus cannot do much with us unless we let him. The most important part of any encounter with God, is what we bring to it. If, like the people of Nazareth, we are close minded, skeptical, satisfied with things as they are, then here, too, he can do no mighty work. But if our attitude is open, and willing, and expectant, then there is no limit to what God can do. That is why we are now engaged in a Spirit of Helping stewardship campaign. That is why we have called in church consultants, not only to help us raise money (though we do not apologize for that) but to see if they know of something new which God may be up to in the other churches with whom they come across in this great country of ours. That is why we asked you for your ideas through the survey which we sent out during the summer. And that is why we are asking you to say "yes" when you are asked to help in this campaign, when you are asked to raise your level of financial support, and when you are asked to assist in the new ministries we want to initiate during the coming months.

Let us not close off the spirit of God which seeks to move among us. Let us not shackle the spirit of Christ among his own people. Let us not assume that God cannot be at work in something ordinary, something right here among us. When God becomes real, often He challenges His people to try new things, to stretch our comfort zones, to take some risks for the sake of His Kingdom. Let it not be said of us that He could do no mighty work here.