

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jesus said to them: "A prophet is not without honour, except in his native place and among his own kin and in his own house."

Mark 6, 1-6

"I knew his mother and his grandparents. They didn't come to much. So, who does he think he is?" We've all heard dismissive comments like this. They are normally motivated by jealousy or an irresistible desire to cut others down to size. That's the kind of gossip that went around Nazareth when Jesus excelled himself in his hometown synagogue. There is often something in us that prevents us from rejoicing in the success of those around us. In fact, we've even seen young people from the wrong side of the tracks deprived of education or other opportunities to better themselves, simply because they come from disadvantaged neighbourhoods or because they are just ordinary people.

The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind is the story of William Kamkwamba, who grew up on his family's small farm in the tiny village of Masitala in Malawi. Denied admission to high school because his parents could not afford to pay fees and buy text-books for him, William began borrowing books from the closest library. In an out-of-date science book, he discovered how a windmill could serve to generate electricity. Through frequent visits to the rubbish dump located in a town some distance from his home, William gathered the materials he needed to build a rudimentary windmill, along with the wire and fittings need to put together a power line from the windmill to his house. Despite being ridiculed by students of the school to which he was refused admission, William persevered in bringing to completion the task he had set himself. He used his windmill to provide light for, and pump water to, the houses of his village. There is something of the prophet in this young man, whose tenacity, selflessness and imagination brought light and hope to the struggling people among whom he grew up. (William Kamkwamba & Bryan Mealer, *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, Harper Collins, London, 2010)

I do not know whether William is of a particular religious faith or of none. However, he is a very decent young man who had a dream to embark on a process that might release his own family and the other families of his village from the poverty and disadvantage that had gripped their lives. He took his dream to his own people, and they turned him away. Instead of giving up, he persisted, and achieved something far beyond his initial dream. Someone, whom William did not know, alerted the Malawi Minister of Education to what William had created. As a result, this rejected, village boy was awarded a scholarship to an international school in Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi. Since then, he has gone on to gain a Bachelor's degree from Dartmouth College, New Hampshire USA, and now works in a non-profit organisation which provides digital education for communities in developing countries. He has also established a foundation called "The Moving Windmills Project", which has provided schools and computers for the Kasungu district of Malawi, where he grew up.

William Kamkwamba's story echoes that of Ezekiel, the subject of today's first reading. Overwhelmed by a visitation from God, Ezekiel fell on his face in fear. But God picked him up and commissioned him to go and preach to his own people: "I'm sending you to the family of Israel, a rebellious nation, if ever there was one. They and their ancestors have fomented rebellion right up to the present. They're a hard case, these people to whom I am sending you. - hardened in their sin. Tell them:

'This is the Message of God.' They are a defiant bunch. Whether or not they listen, at least they'll know that a prophet's been here" (Ezekiel 2, 1-5).

Today's gospel-reading recounts how little had changed over the five hundred years between Ezekiel and Jesus. The people of Nazareth, totally lacking in religious imagination, could not comprehend how God's Spirit could be at work in the person of Jesus, a mere carpenter, who had grown up among them. The problem that Jesus created for himself by preaching as he did in his home-town synagogue was a cultural one of narrow-mindedness. While those who knew him were initially amazed by the way he preached and taught, they could not shake off their opinion of him that they had formed through thirty years of rubbing shoulders with him. Almost certainly they would have concluded that preaching as he did was sheer arrogance. That explains why Mark notes that "they took offence at him, they found him just too much to put up with" (Mark 6, 3). Jesus ended up scratching his head at the way he had been received. It was his turn to be amazed - "at their unbelief".

But let's not be in a rush to criticise those who were intent on cutting him down to size. It might well be a sobering exercise for us to recall our own readiness to switch off people around us simply because we think we know them only too well. We can be quick to ignore and dismiss others simply because we have prematurely concluded that they will never have anything to say that is worth hearing. It just doesn't occur to us that God's Spirit can be at work in them. Are we any different from the people of Nazareth? Our disbelief is surely no different from theirs, for we, too, are inclined to limit what we actually believe God can do in our lives and in the lives of those with whom we live and work and study.

The visit of Jesus to his home-town looked like a dismal failure. Yet, it was an object lesson to his disciples that following in his footsteps would not always meet with resounding success, that they would encounter people who would laugh at them, ignore them and dismiss them and their message without a second thought. Painful as the rejection he received truly was, Jesus' experience underlined the fact that, in coming among us, he embraced the fullness of being human. There was nothing from which he was exempt.

Finally, let's not leave the readings of this Fourteenth Sunday without giving some attention to Paul's persistent prayer beseeching God to free him from the temptation which plagued him. That his prayer was not answered as he had hoped is a clear message that God is content to work through and around our human inadequacies and frailty. A clear corollary of that is that any good we achieve in our efforts to live and proclaim the Gospel is attributable to God. We are but God's instruments. Our struggles with temptation and with our personal limitations are a clear reminder that our successes belong to God.

In imitation of Ezekiel, we are invited to take on the role of prophet, proclaiming the good news handed on to us by Jesus. Sometimes, that will mean that we are alienated, ridiculed and rejected. But our faith in Jesus will be measured by the depth of our conviction that, despite the obstacles we encounter from within ourselves and from rejection by others, the justice of God will eventually triumph over the injustices we experience, and the compassion, mercy and goodness of God will overcome bitterness, pettiness and hatred.