

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon Text: Mark 6:1-13

Theme: “*The Message*”

Grace, peace and mercy to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The philosophy of our day says there is no absolute truth, nor is there anything such as absolute evil. Instead, the world in which we live is made up of each person’s story so no one can say that another person’s story is right or wrong.

Into this sea of uncertainty stand’s God’s Word which is founded on the solid rock of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the message and the Triune God commissions you as his messengers to proclaim his word of peace and salvation to this fallen world.

Heavenly Father, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

The call to repentance

The enduring fundamental problem for all humanity is that we are separated from God. Since the fall, our natural direction of travel is away from God, so then helps to understand that God’s solution is to call people back to himself. We call this repentance – turning back to God.

This turning back or repenting towards God is important to understand because too often we make the mistake of thinking that repentance means to ‘fix yourself up’. The emphasis is then on the work we might try to do to sort ourselves out so we become pleasing and acceptable to God. This simply won’t do in God’s eyes. God knows that whatever we might try to do to make ourselves right, we will always fall short of his standard of perfection.

Rather than encouraging us or empowering us to fix ourselves up, God call us back to him so he can fix us up. God restores us to himself through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Through the atoning blood of Jesus we are made right with Triune God once more. This is the simple message that God wants us to hear and live out. “Turn back to me, let me fix you up. Let me restore you back to me.”

God’s messengers

Today’s reading tell the story of five messengers and Ezekiel is the first of those. Ezekiel didn’t proclaim his own message, nor did he decide he was going to be the one to tell others about God and his plans for the Israelites. It was the Lord who sent Ezekiel to speak on his behalf to the Israelites.

What was the message Ezekiel was to proclaim? God said, “Warn the wicked and if he does not turn from his wickedness or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity” (Ez 3:19). God’s word says people are to turn from their ways so they can travel upon God’s way which he has already prepared for them. God calls us to step from the path we map for ourselves which ends in disaster and to follow his way which is the right way.

How does God measure the success of those who proclaim his word? Not by the numbers of new church members, nor by the numbers of those who repent and allow God to restore them. In fact God says to Ezekiel, “whether they hear or *refuse to hear* (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them” (Ez 2:5). God doesn’t count the numbers that are for him or against him. Instead he asks whether the messenger has faithfully delivered the message. You see the power and authority comes from God and his Word. If God’s messengers share any other word, it has no power or authority from God. It is no longer God’s word by which sinful people may be restored to him through Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Jesus. And if the work of Jesus is the central message that follows God’s call to repentance, we might think that when Jesus preached the good news people would certainly listen to *his* message. Well many people did listen to him, but many from his home town refused to hear his message at all. Jesus had already been preaching, healing the sick and performing remarkable miracles. Many people were witnesses to his divine power and authority. But for the people of Nazareth, they knew Jesus as just one of the young men who were a part of their community.

To them, Jesus was a carpenter, so by what authority was he now speaking with in the synagogue? That they referred to Jesus as a carpenter was a back-handed comment that was really suggesting maybe he would be better off sticking to carpentry rather than preaching! The people of Nazareth treated Jesus with contempt and they treated his message with the same contempt.

The Apostles. Now into this world Jesus sends his apostles, sending them as pairs so the truthfulness of a testimony is established ‘by the mouth of two witnesses’ (see Dt 17:6). Jesus only sends out the twelve once they

warns them that not everyone will receive *his* message from *their* lips. He said, “If any place will not receive you and if they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them” (Mk 6:11).

The idea of shaking the dust from your feet may sound a little odd to us, but in fact there is significant symbolism in this ritual. The key is found in remembering that the Jewish identity was bound up with the Promised Land that God had given to his people. Given that the land was so important to the Israelites, when they would return from a foreign land, they would carefully shake the dust from their clothing and from their shoes. In this way, they wouldn’t contaminate the Promised Land with the unholy dust of a foreign land. The clear message enacted is that the people of God put their trust in him and they were thanking him for his gift of the Promised Land by being careful not to defile it.

We can now understand more of the significance of Jesus instruction to his disciples to shake the dust from their shoes if no-one will receive them in a town they might come to. By shaking the dust from this stubborn village back into the village the message is, ‘We want nothing more to do with this place or with you people.’ As messengers of Jesus, it is the same as if the people had rejected Jesus and now *he* wants nothing more to do with them.

Will Jesus continue to love these people and will he continue to reach out, calling them to be reconciled? Yes, of course he will. But people should also understand that their rejection of Jesus will have eternal consequences.

So Jesus’ apostles went out and they faithfully proclaimed the message that people should repent. As well as this simple message, they also cast out demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and they were healed. The ministry of the apostles was an extension of Jesus’ ministry. Jewish law recognised the sent one is as the one who commissioned them. So in the context of Jesus sending out the twelve who are working by his authority, it is as if he is the one who is doing the proclaiming and the healing.

St Paul. So now we turn to St Paul, the apostle who was specially commissioned to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul continued the simple message of repenting in order that God could restore us through the work of Jesus. The emphasis that Paul brings through this reading is his own weakness. Paul knows that extraordinary things have been revealed to him, and armed with these experiences, he could really achieve fame and glory for himself.

Instead of becoming puffed up with his importance, Paul, God’s special messenger who is bridging the divide between the Jews and Gentiles, is afflicted with his own messenger – but Paul’s is from Satan, a thorn in the flesh. Even though Paul pleads with the Lord for the thorn to be taken from him, the Lord answers with these wonderful words, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”. I’m sure there were many times Paul still wanted the thorn to be taken from him but this is where we see God’s grace enacted most powerfully, when a faithful Christian has all of their skills and abilities stripped back so that only Christ remains. It is here in our weakest moments, when we still give witness to the saving grace of God in our lives that the power of God is most clearly revealed. This is never more evident than when someone ‘dies in Christ’.

We continue as God’s messengers

Which brings us to Cairns in 2009. We are weak people who consistently fall short of God’s glory, now matter how hard we might try to satisfy his demands of us. Sometimes the closer we come to obeying God’s commandments, the harder we fall when we realise we have slipped up again. So God’s gospel message remains the same for us, “Repent, turn back to me so I can make you well”. And whenever you do turn back to God through your prayers, through your worship, your confession of sins and reception of God’s forgiveness you proclaim the Lord’s death and resurrection until he comes again. Your friends, family and neighbours will hear and see the message of faith you bring into their lives.

As you shine the light of Christ, some will hear the message, many will not. You may become frustrated, perhaps very frustrated that so many people, especially those closest to you won’t receive God’s grace which is freely given. However frustrated you may become, this is not to be your concern. Trust that you are one of the many messengers God is using in the world today. The message remains the same, “Turn back to God, let him fix you up. Let him restore you back to himself.” Through God’s message the Holy Spirit will call, gather, enlighten, and sanctify the whole Christian church on earth, and keep it with Jesus Christ in the true faith.

And the may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.