

Reflection for Pentecost 6 by Rev'd Peter Shaw

Perhaps more than we realise, our lives are shaped by the opinions of others.

We notice this most in other people – especially when political policies seem to be driven more by opinion polls than by reasonable and responsible reflection. Sometimes the politicians have avoided public opinion and simply gone for what has come to be called “political correctness”. Sadly, there have been several instances of this in our country in recent times, the wearing of crucifixes at work and the renaming of Christmas by some local authorities being among them.

Jesus had a mission to fulfil. He wasn't here to “do his own thing”, but to say what his Father had given him to say and to do the works his Father had given him to do. We hear him saying to his disciples, “Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work” (John 14.10). He spoke to his opponents about “the work the Father has given me to finish” (5.36). He said he had to “do the work of him who sent me” (9.4). His prayer in John 17 includes the words, “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do” (17.4).

Of course, he had to speak and act in bearing in mind the context of the real people and situations of his time. But the Father's words and actions are always relevant to real people and situations. We don't have to tone them down or modify them to fit into today's “political correctness”.

Jesus brought a message of revealed truth and of love and grace freely offered to all. God's grace calls for our repentance and faith and is directed towards changes of life and life-style. Although Jesus' message was the fulfilment of the prophecies and hopes of the Jewish people, it wasn't what they expected or wanted to hear – it wasn't “politically correct”.

Early in his ministry, Jesus went to his home town, Nazareth. They were amazed at his teaching. “Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles! Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?” And as Mark tells us, they took offence at him (Mk 6.2-3).

They were “amazed”, yet they “took offence”. Curious, isn't it? We can understand local pride when a successful “old boy/girl” comes home. In a way we claim some credit for that – deserved or otherwise! But what they observe in the teachings and miracles of Jesus hasn't come from them here in Nazareth. They almost seem to be questioning whether this really is the Jesus they have known.

Jesus' response, “Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honour” (v. 4), may well have been a proverb current at the time. It is quoted in all four gospels (Mt. 13.57; Lk. 4.24; Jn 4.44). The point is that, following the visit to Jerusalem at age twelve, Jesus had gone home “obedient” to Joseph and Mary (Lk. 2.51).

Now he was in Nazareth, not to “perform” for them, but to speak the Father's words and do the Father's works. The only problem was their lack of faith – “He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith” (vv. 5-6). Luke says they were so furious they were going to throw him over the brow of the hill (Lk. 4.28-29).

The mission of Jesus was urgent and non-negotiable. It is remarkable to us that his public ministry extended only three-and-a-half years. The unbelief of Nazareth couldn't keep him from pressing on – “teaching from village to village” (v. 6b). Indeed, it was at this point that he gathered his twelve disciples and “sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits” (v. 7).

Time was short. His simple instructions impressed on them the urgency of the mission – “Take nothing for the journey except a staff – no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra tunic.

Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them” (vv. 8-11). They were to travel light – a walking-stick and ordinary footwear. They were to depend on God to provide them with food and shelter through the hospitality of Jewish households. The first house that welcomed them was to be their base of operations in that village. But the message was non-negotiable – and wherever the message was rejected, they were to leave and “shake the dust off their feet”. Whenever devout Jews left Gentile territory, they did this to dissociate themselves from it. The disciples were to indicate in no uncertain terms that their Jewish hearers were acting like pagans in rejecting the message. Their urgent message was that “people should repent”. Their preaching was accompanied with many miracles of healing (vv. 12-13).

The key issue for today’s church is to “stay on track” – keeping steadfastly to the mission committed to us. We don’t face a three-and-a-half-year time frame. It’s now nearly two thousand years since these events. In a sense we have come to a more “settled” mission and ministry. Technically, the urgency is still there. In practice, it is much more subdued.

In the eighteenth century, George Whitefield said that he lived each day - in the awareness that this could be the very day that the Lord Jesus would return. I am not sure that is the degree of motivation of most of today’s Christians – whether people, ministers or churches. Jesus constantly urged his followers to “keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come... you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (Mt. 24.42,44).

It’s now nearly two thousand years since these events. Science and technology have revolutionised the way we live and communicate. We have a greater understanding of the physical laws and their dependability. Global travel and communications have brought the whole world to our door-step. We tend to believe ourselves to be “grown-up” and no longer needing rules from God or anyone else. We live in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. We have a whole smorgasbord of “faith options” – including “no faith”. We much prefer reason to revelation – and Faith.

Yet the advances of our knowledge have also highlighted the depth of our failures and need. The confidence of the Victorian era that everything was going to get better and better has been shattered by two World Wars and innumerable other conflicts since then. We aren’t really becoming the more compassionate world we had dreamed about.

The rosy picture of human nature has been shattered. The non-negotiable message of Jesus calls us – sinners all – to repentance and faith. Yes, we need to find timely words to share the timeless message with today’s generation. But it isn’t compassion or love that tones down its call, that softens the reality of sin and fails to offer salvation.

Jesus began his ministry with the call for them to “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Mt. 4.17). It is our response to that call that brings us into God’s family and Kingdom, that commissions us to carry the call of the gospel into the community about us. May we be steadfast in fulfilling our mission as His followers. AMEN