

In the name of one God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, Amen.

This morning's Gospel reading contains what I find to be an amazing passage. "And (Jesus) could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief." *He could do no deed of power* there and was *amazed* at their unbelief.

It's hard for me to get a grip on the image of Jesus being *unable* to do something and then to be *amazed* by anything! He was, after all, God Incarnate. John's Gospel makes it clear that Jesus, the Word of God, was with God; indeed *was* God, before there was anything else. He was there when the Red Sea parted and children of Israel walked across on dry land. Nothing in Scripture says that that act was difficult, or that it amazed Him that it worked. He was there when all of the animals of the earth entered the ark, when they lived together in harmony and when they went out to repopulate the world. He was there when a great fish swallowed Jonah and transported him to Nineveh, unharmed. He was there for all of the miraculous events in earthly history – and we don't read that he was *ever unable* to do anything. Nor was he ever amazed before His encounter the unbelief of these people. The events of Jesus' return to Nazareth must be put into some sort of context before they make any sense at all.

Mark tells this story in the beginning of the sixth chapter of the Gospel. In the previous chapter, there is the tale of Jesus and the disciples going across the Sea of

Galilee to Gentile country and meeting the Geresene demoniac. Jesus drove a thousand evil spirits out of this incredibly dangerous man, put the spirits into pigs and ran them off into the sea. Whereupon the former demon-possessed man became a member of society again. Then Jesus and the disciples returned to Galilee and a woman who had suffered from 12 years of hemorrhages was cured simply by touching Jesus' clothing. And He went on to raise the young daughter of Jairus from the dead. This trip back to Nazareth was preceded by Jesus' showing the absolute power of God over evil spirits, over physical and emotional illness and even over death itself.

Mark tells us that when Jesus arrived back home in Nazareth, He went into the local place of worship and began to teach them with authority and wisdom, just as He had everywhere else He had gone. At first they heard Him for what He was – the authoritative voice of God. But then they began to look at Him as the local boy, come home and acting differently than he did when he left.

In the South, we have a phrase for what the Nazoreans saw when Jesus returned home. In their eyes, He had gotten “above his raisin’,” and it angered them. You can tell how angry they were by the use of the question, “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?” For these people to refer to Jesus as “Mary’s son,” rather than “Joseph’s son,” was a clear insult to Jesus’ parentage and a great way to put Him in His place. Faced with their anger, insults and lack of faith, Mark tells us Jesus was both amazed and unable to do what He had done so often and so well before.

Many of us probably have a hard time with this image of Jesus, walking out of Nazareth, shaking his head in amazement and bemoaning the fact that He could not work any great miracles within the town. The reason for our problem is simply that we are occasionally guilty of the sin of docetism. Docetism is the high-falutin' theological term for our need to recognize the divine nature of Jesus while forgetting – or at least discounting – his humanity.

You see, we understand that Jesus is God, in human skin. What we have more trouble with is Jesus, the carpenter, who was just as dirty and smelly as his disciples when they trudged into Nazareth that day. We have trouble believing that Jesus could have a runny nose, or bad breath, or in this case, that He could not comprehend the unbelief he found in his home town. And most importantly, we have trouble believing that anything could stop Jesus from performing miracles at the drop of a hat.

This text has been used by well-meaning church-going folk for centuries to support their theory that it takes great faith on the part of the miracle receiver for a miracle to occur. Many stories have been told, and movies made with “faith healers” as their subjects. But Mark's Gospel indicates that *not* to be the case. Jesus did cure people of great faith and applauded them for their faith. But in chapters 3, 4 & 5, Mark tells stories of Jesus healing the man with the withered hand, stilling a storm and exorcising the Geresene's demons. In all of these cases, there was no need for the person or people affected by Jesus' power to have any faith at all in His actions. God

does miracles where God will and how God will and we don't *have to* be active participants in the actions of God.

We also don't know if Jesus *could not* work miracles in Nazareth, or whether he *would not* work miracles in Nazareth. If it is the former, perhaps it is because the people would not bring themselves to Him for that purpose. Or maybe Jesus just didn't want to "waste" a miracle on those whose minds were not open to His power in the world. For to perform a miracle on someone whose life would not thereafter be spent in closer relationship with God would indeed be to "waste" the miracle.

I don't know for sure why Jesus didn't work miracles in Nazareth, but I believe this about miracles: the God who is powerful enough to create the world is powerful enough to do anything God decides to do. This same God performed miracles throughout the Bible and there is no reason to believe that that miraculous nature has changed into something else now. And I cannot tell you *why* God ever does – *or does not* work miracles in the world. It is a mystery. Which gets us back to the importance of Jesus' humanity and the need for us to avoid docetism.

We *want* a God of "power and might," a God who – simply because we earnestly pray for it – will work wondrous acts, more or less on command. We *want* a God who will make it rain when we think it is too dry and will stop the rain when we think the ground has had enough. We want to be able to pray, "God please make my children into the people they ought to be," and then to see the kids who have always had their own minds, doing exactly as *we* would have them do. *I* want to be able to pray for my

neck problems to clear up and then stand in front of you and tell you that my condition has miraculously improved. We even want God to hear our cries of economic despair and then instantly experience a lottery win – which we assure God will be alright, because we will give 10% to the church and will not let the money change us.

That is *not* who God is. There are miracles in the world. Some of them come as a result of our prayers and relationship to God, but make no mistake – we don't *earn* miracles. We don't pray enough, or believe enough to warrant a miracle. Jesus knew this about the nature and God and acted accordingly.

Jesus was human, just like us. One of the greatest powers of Jesus' humanity is that He became our brother in humanity so that we could get to know better who our Father – our Abba – our *daddy* is; and so that we could learn to experience the love of the Father through the love of human beings. There are great miracles in the world – produced from the breathtaking, awesome and *unpredictable* power of God. But do you know what the *real* miracle is? Do you know what miracle we really *can* call down any time we want it? The miracle that came precisely from Jesus' humanity; the miracle of knowing that we are *always* loved as children of God and that we will *never* be left alone.

No matter how much we suffer in life, physically, mentally, spiritually or emotionally, Jesus was there before us. He knew and therefore God knows how we feel. If you suffer physically, the crucifixion speaks of Jesus' physical suffering. If you are mentally tired – so was Jesus as he walked out of Nazareth that day. If your spirit

feels dry and shriveled up, picture Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. And if you feel emotionally let down by those whom you know and love – remember Jesus’ amazement at the people of His hometown and extended family who refused to believe that He was who He was.

No matter how bad things may get, Jesus knows, therefore *God knows* where we are and how we feel. And the promise is that we will never be alone in our suffering. There can be no greater miracle than that. Thanks be to God.

Amen.