

SERMON: Being Sent to do God's Mission – Ezekiel 2; Mark 6.1-13

Dear Lord, you have given us each a mission to perform during our life on this earth. Thank you that you always give to us exactly what we need to achieve what you need done. Amen.

Have you ever been asked to do something that completely flummoxed you? You knew you had to do it but you had no idea how you would get it done! When I was Secretary of UnionsACT there was a national campaign on for workers rights. I had about 2 weeks to pull together a massive rally at the Canberra Race Course. I invited the then ACT Chief Minister, Jon Stanhope to be a main speaker and arranged a lot of media coverage so it had to be a success or else the campaign would suffer and I would look like a fool. The pressure was on but so much was out of my control- what if only a handful came? I was really hyped on the day. I started out incredibly anxious and then got more and more excited as the people streamed through the gates. Over 6,000 workers came along, which for the ACT was a pretty big show of solidarity.

When I reflected on today's Ezekiel and gospel readings I remembered that anxiety. I remembered what it was like to embark on an arduous task over which you had little control and I wondered if that was a small taste of how Ezekiel and the disciples felt when God gave them their seeming impossible and thankless missions.

Ezekiel 2

Most theologians agree that Ezekiel was among the first body of exiles taken to Babylon along with their king in the spring of 597 BC. His prophecies addressed both those in exile as well as those who remained in Judah. These two groups were in frequent contact with each other and both were passionately concerned about the fate of Jerusalem.

Verses 1 and 2 of the chapter tell us that Ezekiel was 30 years old in 593BC when he received his first visions of God. These visions have three major themes: Chapters 1-24 are set before the fall of Jerusalem in 586BC. They prophecy doom against the city and all Judah. Chapters 25-32 are prophecies against foreign nations and Chapters 33-48 provide the hope of the full restoration of Israel.

The Israelites, both those remaining in Judah and those in exile, reacted strongly against Ezekiel's first prophecies warning about the impending destruction of Jerusalem. The rest of Ezekiel 2 has God preparing Ezekiel for this opposition. He warns Ezekiel that the Israelites are impudent and stubborn. They're like scorpions and they're rebellious! And yet for 7 long years and beyond he still

expected Ezekiel to stand firm. To achieve this seemingly impossible mission God gives him two gifts. Verse 2 tells us He anoints Ezekiel with His power through a spirit and in verse 9 the power of His Word written on a scroll. In Ezekiel's poetic language this scroll is described as having *words of lamentation and mourning and woe* and he is required to eat these words. In Chapter 3 verse 3 we are told that as Ezekiel consumes the scroll it "tastes as sweet as honey."

This is powerful symbolism describing how by yielding to God's word, even if it involves pain, we may find a sweet strength. Armed with God's spirit and His sweet word Ezekiel is empowered to begin his prophetic mission.

Now the world of ancient Israel was of course very different to our modern world. Yet they were faced with many familiar issues: uncertainty about the future; international upheavals and wars; institutional and political corruption; faith in turmoil. Into those messy circumstances God spoke through Ezekiel not just fierce warnings but also hope. The hope of God's loving restoration of his lost children of Israel. And we know through the rest of God's word in the bible that His desperate desire to restore humanity did not stop with Israel.

Mark 6.1-13

Our reading from Mark 6 gives us some insight into the ongoing, hope-filled mission to restore all humanity. Here we have Jesus' brutal encounter with the people of his hometown, Nazareth. The very same mission prophesied by Ezekiel is being brought to fruition by the Son of God, in human form, Jesus. He has been proclaiming repentance for the kingdom of God is near. Many Israelites have heard and believed his gospel message. But not so in the small village of Nazareth. The people who have seen Jesus grow up and work in their town for the past 30 years cannot understand the wisdom he shares nor accept the miracles he performs. It leads Jesus to say the famous words in verse 4: *'Prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.'* A more modern way of expressing this wisdom is "Familiarity breeds contempt".

His family, his relatives and his townspeople all knew the ordinary, human Jesus. So when he displayed his extra-ordinary, divine abilities they could not reconcile the two. Many of us may have had a similar experience when we first told our family and friends that we had become followers of Jesus. The changes that this brought in our lives were simply not able to be understood by some of the closest people in our lives. Jesus can understand the pain that this can bring because He experienced it too. Most of his own family did not follow him and the town held him in contempt. And when He then sends his disciples on their

first mission outreach, he prepares them for the same rejection that He got in Nazareth.

Ezekiel was given by God the power of the spirit and the Word. Jesus, the Son of God, gave the disciples the power of His authority over unclean spirits and the power to proclaim God's kingdom through repentance. Verse 12 tells us :*"So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³ They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.*

And that was just the beginning! Jesus told his disciples many times that soon after he was crucified, resurrected and gone to be with His Father in heaven they would receive even greater power! We know that this happened on the Day of Pentecost. Filled with the power of the Holy Spirit the disciples continued their dramatic mission to spread the good news of God's kingdom first to the Jewish people and then to the world! Imagine for a moment that we here in this parish were the only followers of Jesus in the entire world. Imagine being filled with the conviction and power of our Father's heart-rending desire to save humanity. Imagine how that would drive us to fulfil the mission Jesus has given us to reach out to the lost and lonely, the poor and the rich, the humble and the proud, the weak and the strong, to all of our Father's children!

Brothers and sisters, this remains our mission today. No matter how hard it can sometimes be, Jesus has given to each of us through the Holy Spirit, His power and authority to proclaim God's kingdom, through repentance and healing. Last week we were reminded of Jesus' call to *"Do not be afraid, only believe."*

Do not doubt for a minute the power behind those words. When we stand firm in our faith then whatever we need to fulfil God's mission will be provided. The disciples weren't ready to be sent out! They didn't understand the teaching of Jesus fully. It's highly likely that they were fearful of what they would face as they went out two by two. But they did believe in Jesus. It wasn't a perfect belief, they still had much to learn and to grow. Yet on that foundation they bravely set forth. So it is for us. As theologian James Edwards suggests: *"a genuine call to ministry always call us to that for which we are not adequately prepared."* It is through our weakness that we experience the support and presence of our Lord Jesus. It is through our faith that moments of fear can be overcome and transformed into God's victory.

Let me conclude in prayer. Dear Father, we give you thanks and praise for your saving grace, given to us through your Son, our Lord Jesus. May we stand firm in our faith, trusting that you will provide all that we need to fulfil your mission. Amen.