

Believing and Following

Sometimes we can be too close to a place, event, or even people, so that we don't fully know, see, appreciate, or believe, what is right there in front of us? Have you ever had that experience? 'Familiarity breeds contempt' is a thought that comes into my mind.

I was reminded of this when I was watching the news this week and they were talking about the Beanie Festival in Alice Springs, which is apparently now world renowned and people travel from far and wide to see and participate in it. But as I stretched my memory to think back, in the six years we lived in Alice I never went near the Beanie Festival. Then I thought about the number of times we visited Uluru while we lived in the Centre, but our kids had friends who were born in Alice and they had never been to see this wonder of nature which people come from all over the world to see. The same is true of when we lived in Darwin and the many locals who hadn't been to Litchfield or Kakadu national parks. We can be so close to a place or an event that we don't get into and appreciate what is right there with us.

We can have this same experience with people, and you might have seen or even experienced this yourself. We sometimes hear of the person who has become a big success in their career, business, sport, music or acting, but when they go back to their own hometown they are treated like little Jack or Jill whom everyone has always known. And much of the time they like that; they appreciate the chance to get away from fame and adulation and just be a regular person again. But sometimes, and there are many TV shows and movies based on this plot, they feel that those who have known them a long time don't appreciate what they now have to offer from their experience and expertise. The closer we are not just to places and events, but also to people, the harder it can be for us to see and appreciate both what they have achieved and also what they now have to offer to us.

"A prophet is not welcome in his own home town", is another saying which might come to us in thinking about a situation like this. It is another of those Bible quotes which has made

its way into everyday usage, and it comes from the Bible reading we have here today. After being out and about in His ministry, teaching, healing people, calming storms and doing other miracles, Jesus goes back to His hometown; to His family and the people who had known Him as He was growing up. But, despite how people elsewhere are now looking at and following Him, how is He received here? They think His teaching is great, but they don't understand where His wisdom and His power come from. Why not? Because they have preconceptions which still judge Him in human terms; he is the carpenter, the son of Mary. He is a brother of people they know. So, rather than be happy that this local boy ends up being the Saviour of God's people, they are upset by what He is doing. As a result of their lack of faith, Jesus is unable to do there everything He can do elsewhere. As Jesus is surprised by their lack of faith, compare to that to the faith of the two people just before this incident who we looked at last week, the Jewish leader and the sick woman; people whose faith Jesus praised even though they didn't really know Him. Being too close, allowing preconceptions to get in the way, stopped those who knew Jesus the best to see Him as He now really is.

Can we also allow having preconceptions, or 'knowing' Jesus too well, get in the way of our faith? I've shared before that as someone who was brought up in faith, and I am very thankful for that, I sometimes look with envy at those who come to faith later in life and have a joy and appreciation of what they now have that I don't always experience. When we have something our whole life, it is sometimes easy to take it for granted. But that's on us then that when looking at accounts like this we take the time to stop and reflect on what our faith in God really means for us, and also what preconceptions we allow to get in the way of our faith. Sometimes, and many of us have seen this with friends and family, this closeness can lead people to going away from their faith completely; it is just too familiar and so too easily taken for granted.

So, have a think: are there preconceptions or complacencies which you have about your faith which get in the way of you believing in and following Jesus? If so, how can you address and work through them? Perhaps spend time with God in His Word. Refocus on worship and what that is all about. Find someone to talk this through with, even on an ongoing basis. Pray, asking God to help you to see Jesus as who He is as your Saviour, and spending time reflecting on what that means to your life. Knowing Jesus well should bring us closer to Him, not push us away, so spend the time in helping your relationship with Him build and grow.

In many ways this reading is about discipleship, a word which means many things, but a part of which is both Believing and Following. And now, after those incidents from last week in which the faith of people was praised, and here where people are lacking in faith, Jesus sends out the disciples. Going out in His name they have the power to perform miracles, and they spread the message of God's love to all people. By telling them to take very little with them Jesus is reminding them that they rely solely and completely on God. It is following Jesus and carrying out ministry in His name, trusting fully and completely in Him. Putting their whole lives into this. Discipleship.

What does this life of following Jesus, taking His message out, having faith and trust in Him, following Him, discipleship, what does this look like for us? I like the picture of the windy and hilly path for this. It is a path which, when we follow it, we don't know what is around the next bend, what is over the hill. It won't always be flat or straight, or easy. But we know both who are with and where we are headed, whatever we come up against.

And it's not always easy, is it? Like those disciples who were sent out to carry the message of God's love in Jesus to the world, we are sent out also. We talk about this often, how do we do that? In one way, it is living out our faith in our relationships. Just being who we are as people who know and believe in God's love for us, and allowing that to come out in our lives. And, like Jesus points out to the disciples He sends out in this reading, trusting God.

Quite often we don't see the results of our witnessing and sharing. But that's ok, because ultimately, it's not up to us. We may be a part of the journey of people in their coming to faith, a journey which is going to take a different path, with different twists and turns, for each person. All we now do, all we can do, is to follow God faithfully and live our lives in Him, and allow this faith to come out in what we do.

Knowing God well, having a close relationship with Jesus, is a good thing, so don't allow complacency or familiarity, or our preconceptions, either weaken or get in the way of that. And having faith which leads to this relationship of love, and hope, and peace, and joy, hear and follow the call to go out and share this with others, because living a full life in and with Him is what God wants to give to everyone. As we travel this path of following, this path of discipleship, we do it in faith knowing that God is with us in all the ups and downs, the twists and turns, and that the work and the witness He now calls us to do we do in His love and by His power. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- Can you think of a time when you lived somewhere but never went to see a place or go to an event nearby which others travelled to come to? And/or have you ever felt that the people it was hardest to get recognition from were who know you the best?
- Whether you have been a Christian your whole life, or come to faith more recently, think about your relationship with God. Do you still feel thankful for this, or can it sometimes become a bit every day and complacent? If this is the case, take the time and the effort to work on your relationship with Him through His Word, prayer, and worship.
- Are there preconceptions you have about God or the Christian faith which are in some way preventing your relationship with God from going deeper? If so, bring these to Him and ask Him to help you open yourself up to His love in your life.
- Like Jesus sent out the disciples He also now sends out each one of us. Take the time to reflect on what this means for you. Are there relationships or situations in your life in which you can be a witness of God's love, just by living out your faith? If you struggle with this, and we probably all do at times, pray for God's guidance and strength to be able to trust Him as He works through you.

Pray: thank God for the gift of faith, and ask Him to help us to be open to allowing our faith in Him to continue to grow. Ask God to also help you to go out in His name with faith and trust in Him.

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