

**Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 9) – Year B – July 8, 2009 - Homily**  
**2 Samuel 5: 1-5, 9-10; Psalm 48; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13**  
**Susan E. Wilmot**

Charles Dickens' classic book, *A Tale of Two Cities*, begins like this, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, ...." Although the book was written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is about the events surrounding the French Revolution, Dickens' poetic and prophetic words also capture the events of today, as much as the events described for us in Jesus' visit to His hometown of Nazareth.

Jesus may just have had some of the best times in His own life and ministry in the events preceding tonight's Gospel reading. He has been out and about, healing, teaching, and proclaiming the Good News, and word is getting around about His miraculous deeds of power. Jesus and His disciples return to Nazareth, and by virtue of His reputation Jesus is given the honor of being the teacher in the synagogue that Sabbath day. At first, the best of times continues, as the Gospel account says, "many who heard him were astounded." Then things rapidly go downhill as they remember that this is Jesus, the little boy who grew up to be a carpenter, before becoming a great teacher and prophet. At this point in Mark's Gospel Jesus is described as the son of Mary, and brother to James, Joses, Judas, Simon and several sisters. Incidentally, whether or not Joseph was already dead, being referred to as "the son of Mary" was actually a way to insult Him. The implication being that Jesus was fatherless.

What is really going on here is pretty obvious. The people amongst whom Jesus grew up, those who are as close as family and friends, are jealous and unbelieving that this is the same Jesus who has become popular and well-known as a learned teacher, a compassionate healer, and one who bears great wisdom. Jesus has stepped out of the normal boundaries for a man of his birth, education and training and the people of His hometown have a really hard time adjusting their perceptions to accept this new Jesus. It begs the question, if we had been there, would we be any different? Probably not. Even Jesus' own brothers had a hard time believing Him to be the Son of God. Apparently, our human capacity for believing our own mind-speak, and conforming to societal conventions and norms is much greater than our capacity for faith.

While Jesus' faith remains steadfast and unwavering, we hear that "he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them." We also hear that Jesus is equally amazed at the unbelief that greets Him like the proverbial stone wall. So what are we to understand in that Jesus seemed unable to do many deeds of power, despite His growing reputation for working miracles of healing? Is belief overshadowed by incredulity? Does darkness defeat the Light? Did the Son of God experience a disconnect from the source of all healing and life? No, and thrice no. There are at least three lessons for us here.

The first is the pattern of graciousness that God and Jesus, our Savior, have always established. God does not force healing or new life, redemption or salvation on anyone. Jesus always leaves room for people to come to Him, or not; to accept the gifts He offers, or not. It is the nature and character of God not to force, coerce or push humanity into acceptance, but to simply love without limit and work with and through those who do come in faith. Jesus' seeming lack of power, is simply Godly and loving restraint in consideration of the choices that the people He met made for themselves. Note that the few who did come to Jesus in faith were healed.

The second lesson is also important for you and me. Jesus sends out His disciples two by two to share in the work that God has given to all faithful children: to preach repentance, to cast

out demons, and to anoint and heal all who are sick. In His visit to Nazareth Jesus has shown the disciples what it is to be sent with a mission, and to be rejected. He has prepared all His disciples for the work to be done, but also for the heartbreaking reality that there will always be those who reject the Good News as well as those who joyfully accept the message of hope.

Thirdly, notice that whatever the community of Nazareth may or may not think they know about Jesus, the nature of Jesus' kingship is not changed one iota. He retains His absolute obedience to God and God's will for His life. Jesus also retains and graciously shares His authority over the spiritual world. He empowers His disciples with the authority and power of God in order for them to share in the ministry of proclamation, healing and reconciliation according to God's will. The disciples of His day and you and I in ours, will encounter those who do not welcome the Lord. We are told to shake off the dust of those places, and move on. Remember, Jesus has trod that road before us, all the way to the cross. Simply put, you and I are not in charge of saving the world, Jesus has already accomplished that once, for all. However, with the gift of authority to do the work that God has called each disciple to do, does come responsibility. You may have heard me say this before, but it is worth repeating. Responsibility is purely the ability to respond. That is, responding with gratitude for all that God has done for us; as well as knowing the gift of empowerment in our hearts and our heads; and allowing God to use us as we honor the Lord in our service. In so doing we become responsible, as St. Francis would say, for preaching the Gospel at all times, using words if necessary. It also means that you and I are responsible for continuing Christ's mission of healing in and to the world. Yet, it is easy to fall into the trap of discouragement, because of the pain of disappointment or rejection. So we must always remember that we are not responsible for the *response* to our message and ministries in Christ's Name. You and I are only responsible for our own faithfulness.

The message of love, wisdom, light and hope will be met at some time or another with fear, skepticism, incredulity, darkness and despair. It has been said that, "Not everyone possesses boundless energy or a conspicuous talent. We are not equally blessed with great intellect or physical beauty or emotional strength. But we have all been given the same ability to be faithful" (Gigi Graham Tchividjian). In the best of times or the worst of times, we are never alone. Our Lord is with us now and even unto the end of the ages.

Amen.