

St. Matthew's Church

NEW YORK CITY

POWER FAILURE

Mark 6:1-6

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 5, 2009

The power failure described in today's Gospel has nothing to do with electricity. It has everything to do with the power of Jesus. *"And He could do no deed of power there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and cured them."* It looks as if Jesus came back to His home town and experienced a power failure.

In today's Gospel from Mark an attempt on Jesus' part to reach out to them. It appears, humanly speaking, that His recent miracles in calming the storm, liberating the demoniac, healing the woman, and raising Jairus' daughter had given rise to the personal hope that His hometown and family would be softened to his claims and receive His ministry. So Jesus planned a visit to Nazareth and thus we have the story before us. In our Gospel story, we witness the Lord reaching out to an unbelieving people, what happened to Him in return, and how He and his disciples responded. There is considerable wisdom here for ministering to an unbelieving world.

The Power Failure of Jesus' Ministry by Unbelief: Jesus was careful about his approach to the hometown crowd, for we read that he took his disciples, his devoted entourage, with him. This unmistakably identified him as a rabbi. In addition, he waited until the Sabbath to publicly minister. He did the traditional, conventional thing so as to give as little offense as possible. The Gospel text describe his approach and the hometown reaction: "Jesus left there and went to his home town, accompanied by his disciples. When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. "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, Joses, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us? And they took offense at Him."

Their Reaction Was Amazement: They were amazed at two things: (1.) His "Wisdom." (2.) His "Miracles." They knew He was not a schooled rabbi, and yet He spoke with a lucidity and authority beyond any they had heard. Tales of His stupendous miracles had been told and retold. They were truly amazed. But as they began to talk among themselves, a malignant contempt crept over their souls. "Isn't this the carpenter? This man is a common laborer, the village handyman! He's not so great. He has Galilean accent just like us."

The Contempt Grew: "Isn't this Mary's son?" This was a cheap slam. Sons were always identified by their father, not their mother, even when the father was dead. They were in effect calling his mother a loose living woman and him the illegitimate offspring. These were the people Jesus grew up with. How this must have hurt. Jesus was victim of what all too often is a law of human relationship: familiarity breeds contempt. There may be a reason familiarity breeds contempt: (1.) When you get close to others, you see their inconsistencies, foibles, and contradictions. But this was not so with Jesus. His ethos was perfect. The better people knew Him the more they experienced a growing respect. This is always true with Jesus. This jealous, run-dropping attitude toward Jesus by his hometown was simply "part of humanity's contempt for itself." As a result of their contempt, "they took offense at Him." Knowing His claims, they were faced with the great tri-lemma of C.S. Lewis: He was either the Lord, or a lunatic, or a liar. They chose liar and demonized on at that. (2.) The real danger: There is no danger to us of a physical familiarity with Christ which obscures his divinity and authority over us. But there is a danger of familiarity dulling us to the deep spiritual demands of our faith. The sacred words which so easily get tossed around in Christians conversations can render holy mysteries banal. This desensitizes us to the personal demands of God. "Oh, I know that. It's not so great. It's everyday." It is not! Christ, our life, is an ongoing miracle. Incarnation, grace, and resurrection are the most beautiful words. We must never let our growing familiarity rob us of the dazzling wonder and demands of our faith.

Amazed and Astounded: *"Jesus said to them, 'Only in his home town, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor.' 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.” The Scriptures reveal that Jesus was amazed both by faith and unbelief. In one case He was amazed at the great faith of the Gentile Roman soldier, the centurion who urged Jesus to say the word and his servant would be healed. “When Jesus heard this, He was astonished and said to those following Him, “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.” How marvelous it is to amaze God with the extent of one’s faith.

Astounded at His Own: Christ is astounded at His own people’s lack of faith. This is terrifying, to amaze God with one’s unbelief. I know some people like that. They have seen the power of God in others’ lives, they have seen it in their spouse’s life and in family members and they blew it off. Everything is neatly psychologized and rationalized. Jesus’ personal witness through his Body, the Church, is despised. What darkness to have made such a cavalier rejection of Christ. Why is this so terrifying? Because such disbelief ties Christ’s hands, so to speak, so that healing power, miracles, and grace cease to come. “He could not do any miracles there.” Unbelief hinders God’s power.

Let me make it clear: Jesus could not do miracles because he **would** not. Omnipotence is not omnipotence if it is bound by anything but its own will. Jesus was **morally** compelled not to show his power. Matthew makes this clear: “*And He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.*” Unbelief freezes the exercise of God’s power. At Nazareth, people were seriously saying, “I doubt it.” They said, “why should we believe anything you say?”

Unbelief Robs the Church of its Power: We can add new programs until we do not have enough hours in the day to administrate them or enough bulletin inserts to advertise them. But without a believing expectancy in Christ and His power, nothing will come of it. “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.” I wonder if Jesus is amazed at people today and if He marvels at their unbelief.

If we want to please God, to know His pleasure and power, we must believe that the God revealed in the Old and New Testaments exists and that He acts equitably in behalf of His children. Do you believe this? Christ was amazed by faith as well as the lack of it. What about us amazes Him?

The disciples, now including the Twelve, sat transfixed in Nazareth's synagogue as they watched the tragic exchange between Jesus and the hometown crowd. They learned some important things. They had seen his astounding displays of power, such as calming the sea. But now they saw that there were situations in which "He could not do any miracles," it is times when faith was subverted. To serve Him they must believe.

There does not need to be any power failure in the life of a child of God.

No prayer, no power.
Little prayer, little power.
Much prayer, much power.