

4 July 2021

West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Reading: Mark 6:1-13

It's the summer holidays. Pre-Covid, usually this time of year, lots of people were preparing themselves for a well-deserved holiday. It's something we look forward to and prepare for, for months!

I usually have a to-do list as long as my arm! Preparing for a holiday in South Africa can be quite exhausting! Because there are things that have to be arranged before the time: passports and other documentation, flight tickets, accommodation, a spreadsheet with who we will be visiting when; and then there is the actual packing: clothes for all weather, shoes, toiletries, wee Scottish gifts – and to fit all this in only 4 cases takes skill!

The thing is: the better prepared you are for your trip, the smoother it goes.

We live in a time where everyone is expected to prepare for every eventuality, under all circumstances. To NOT do so, is regarded as careless.

We prepare ourselves, not only for holidays, but for absolutely everything. And we do this to avoid being vulnerable.

But when it comes to living out our faith, Jesus says that we need to be PREPARED to be vulnerable. Because it is only when we are not in control, that we realise that GOD is...

We see this in our Bible reading, where Jesus sends out his disciples to proclaim the good news.

He tells them exactly how to prepare themselves for the journey: he doesn't give them a long checklist, he tells them: "Take NOTHING for the journey, except a staff... No bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra shirt."

Why? Because he wanted them to remember that on this mission, they shouldn't rely on anything or anyone else but HIM. He basically said: "Carry little, trust a lot!"

So what exactly was going on here?

Let's take a wee look at the background to our reading...

In their society it was all about honour and shame. You always had to defend your honour. You could have 'ascribed *honour*' by means of birth, adoption, achievement, military success, or the winning of an argument in public. Honour also resided in some public roles, statuses, and offices: such as a father in a household, or a king.

Shame on the other hand meant the loss of honour.

In our reading Jesus was not suspected to have any honour at all. His genealogy was full of shameful people, like the prostitute Rahab, and the adulteress Bathsheba.

But Jesus surprises all the people there. When he appears in the synagogue, he acts like someone who *has* honour and status. He is acting in such a way that they are speechless, as if *they* are the shameful ones.

This becomes clear in their reaction. In those days you would react to the challenge by insulting the other person. If you could get the other person to retreat or be emotionally upset you would be considered the winner of ‘achieved honour’.

In this case they say: “Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary?” They refer to Jesus as the “son of Mary” and not Joseph, as if they are calling him a fatherless boy. A boy’s name depended on the good name of his father. That’s why they were referred to as “the son of so-and-so.”

Your father’s name would give you honour, status and security. If you did not have a father you were a nobody. You did not matter at all and people would not take you seriously.

But Jesus knew something that the people in his hometown did not know. He had a Father in heaven who sent him to earth with a mission. Jesus prophetically reacted to their hostile behaviour by saying: “Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honour.”

Those people allowed something like status to stand in the way of hearing a life-changing message, of experiencing miracles.

The next thing Jesus did, was to command the disciples to go in two's, because in those days any witness would be regarded as truthful if two people could testify to it.

Once they arrived in a town, they would be totally dependent on the hospitality of others. It was a Hebrew tradition to always show hospitality to strangers. But, if for any reason they were not welcomed, they had to do what every Jew would do when they came back from a journey to a foreign land before entering into the Holy Land again: They had to wipe the dust off their feet – the dust that made them unclean for being in an unclean country among the Gentiles. This was a public statement that they had no part in these people's wrong choices.

So, although the disciples were vulnerable, they were strong, because they knew exactly what to do, and in whose name they went.

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I think there's never been a time in history when we felt more vulnerable than we do at the moment. Covid-19 and all the heartache and uncertainties this pandemic has brought into our personal lives, in the world, and in the church, has stripped us from so many certainties that were part of our lives before...

The church is vulnerable. You've no doubt all heard about the General Assembly's "radical action plan".

There are lots of changes and a huge reduction in ministerial posts planned...

Some people might find this scary, but then – don't you think what Jesus expected his disciples to do could just as well have been described as a "RADICAL action plan"?

Where the outside world might think that the church is vulnerable and we are not in control – as if that's a bad thing – this should be a reminder to us, that yes, we are not in control, but that's NOT a bad thing, because God *is* in control!

To be able to hold on to God, means that we will have to loosen our hold on things like wealth, status, and privilege...

We need to be prepared to be vulnerable.

Brené Brown, a professor in social work, describes vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure." It is that unstable feeling we get when we step out of our comfort zone or do something that forces us to loosen control.

According to her the definition of vulnerability is not winning or losing, it's having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome.

So let's do that. As individuals, and as the church.

Let's dare to be disciples in a world where there are so much more questions than answers.

Let's not rely on any of our current-day fancy gadgets to assist us in this task, but travel light. Let's leave all our burdens behind, and take only courage, love, hope, and grace with us.

Being vulnerable makes us realise just how dependent we are on God. So let's go through life, being PREPARED to be vulnerable, because we are doing this in the name of Jesus Christ.

In Christ ALONE, our hope is found...

Amen