

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC
July 4, 2021, 9:00 a.m.
14th Sunday of Year B Mark 6:1-6

In today's Gospel it becomes very clear that the one thing God cannot do is open a closed mind or a closed heart. Jesus has returned to his hometown of Nazareth, after healing the sick in the neighboring villages. He gives the homily in the Sabbath synagogue service, as was the right of any devout Jew, and His neighbors are struck by His preaching. It is not so much that they are impressed by His words or appreciative of what He has to say. It is more a matter of "Where does He get off talking like this to us?" "Who does He think He is?"

As the Gospel indicates, the townspeople of Nazareth think they have Jesus pretty well sized-up. They know His background, His family—there's nothing special about him in their minds. They remark, "Is He not the carpenter," and even that is a kind of put-down. Today we think of being a carpenter as a fairly decent profession, especially if one belongs to the carpenters' union. But the word "carpenter" is not really the best translation for the term in today's Gospel. The word refers to someone who is more like a "handyman." Surprisingly, Jesus is referred to as "son of Mary" and not as "son of Joseph," which would be the more usual form. This could be a slur, referring to the unusual circumstances surrounding His birth. Remember that in St. Matthew's Gospel even Joseph initially presumed that Jesus was illegitimate, until it was revealed to him the true manner in which Jesus had been conceived. Evidently the gossipmongers have long memories in this small town, where everyone knows everyone else's business. Perhaps that is the point of the story. Because Jesus' neighbors think they have Him all figured out, they are prevented from really knowing who He is and thereby benefiting from what He has to offer. They see the "man" Jesus before them, but they refuse to let the word He speaks touch their hearts. Their minds are made up, and there is no changing them.

We see the same story repeated in our world today in a variety of ways. There are some who reject Jesus, who throw out the whole Christian message, because they say they have heard it all before and it just doesn't make sense. Of course, their "hearing it" may have been in parochial elementary school, or maybe even less extensively in Sunday school or after-school catechism classes one hour a week, and sometimes just for those few years preparing for First Communion or Confirmation. Like the people in today's Gospel they claim to know who this Jesus is, what He is all about.

It should be pointed out that their knowledge of Jesus was taught to them in a very basic elemental form. Being children when they heard it, that was the appropriate way, in fact, that was the only way they could receive it. And, if one factors in what may have been the intellectual, psychological, and spiritual limitations of those who were teaching the Jesus-story to them as children, what they may be left with today as adults is a mere caricature of the actual Jesus. When that incomplete and inadequate picture of Jesus, of Christianity, is then matched up with what these products of a Catholic or Christian education have learned in secular fields about science, philosophy, history, anthropology, etc., that caricature may not stand much of a chance of surviving. It may seem as if their faith is being undermined, even attacked, by secular learning. In reality, a more mature and adult understanding of one's faith can be a vital resource in meeting the challenges of contemporary life, in critiquing what is valuable and what is not so valuable in the secular realm. What is required is a certain openness, a willingness to admit that there is still more to learn about Jesus, about God, about Christianity, about the Catholic tradition of faith. "A little learning is a dangerous thing," as the poet, Alexander Pope, once said. That little learning may give us the false impression that we possess the whole picture, whether it be of Christianity or any other subject. What is needed is the willingness to explore, to question, to remain unsettled in our views.

The people in Jesus' hometown of Nazareth were not able to hear God speaking to them in the person of Jesus because he was all too familiar to them. You have, no doubt, heard it said that "familiarity breeds contempt." That is the attitude at work in today's Gospel and that same attitude can be at work in our lives as well. We can be dismissive, even contemptuous, of all those people whom we think we know so well and whom we may have in fact written off as having nothing to say to us. Yet, it may be through precisely one of these that God is speaking to us today. What we are always in need of is the capacity to be surprised. It has been said that ours is a "God of surprises." We need to be open to those surprises. Today's Gospel reminds us that the Spirit of God can work in the most ordinary of people, in the most humble of circumstances, if we have but eyes to see and ears to hear.