

What was Jesus favourite nursery rhyme? Mary had a little Lamb.

Sometimes things get off to a good start but then they go bad. Why? We get an indication of how this can happen in our gospel from St Mark today.

The account in Mark 6 is a formative incident in Jesus' life and ministry. It was his first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth. He went to the synagogue on the sabbath, evidently at the invitation of the leaders there. We are told that his disciples went with him. At first, things went well as he began to teach. Many who were listening to him were impressed and said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!" (Mark 6:2 NRSV). It appears that those present were impressed not only with the words he had to say but also with the deeds that backed his words up.

No doubt his reputation had preceded him. Most likely that's why Jesus received an invitation to speak. Surely, his teachings and healings had not gone unnoticed. Mark tells us in his gospel that there had already been four miracles performed by Jesus up to this point. Whatever could possibly go wrong?

It could have had something to do with what he said. Interestingly, Mark does not tell us but Luke does. Luke says that Jesus was given the scroll of Isaiah from which to read. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*" (Luke 4:17-19 NRSV).

We have become so accustomed to hearing these words that they have lost some of their force. These chosen words of Jesus from Isaiah 61 are explosive, given the context of the day. First of all, Jesus was saying that God had given him the authority to enact them in his ministry. The Spirit of the Lord was on him, just as it had been on Isaiah. Those words about bringing good news to the poor, the release of captives, the giving of sight to the blind, and setting the oppressed free are a highly charged message, given that the country was under the military occupation of Rome at the time. These words were a political bombshell. As was the mention of the year of the Lord's favour. Jesus was probably referring to the Jubilee year when all debts were cancelled and all confiscated lands were returned to their rightful owners. That would be enough to change the tone of the day.

According to Luke, what followed only added to the dismay of the people. It seems that Jesus was refusing to do any of his mighty works in his hometown for he did not feel that they were worthy. Jesus even backs up his case by telling them that in the time of Elisha no one was healed except Naaman the Syrian. It's not hard to see how things could take another turn.

While all of this was no doubt true, this is not what Mark decided to pick up on. Mark related something else that was going on in the minds of Jesus' listeners that day in the Nazareth synagogue. The problem was that they all knew him too well or thought they did. Their questions took another turn. "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" (Mark 6:3 NRSV). A lot can be read in between the lines of these questions.

It was not so much the nature of the job that was in question but the ordinariness of it. “We know this boy,” they were saying. “How can he talk as he does, putting on airs? What great schools has he gone to? Where are his credentials? Who does he think he is telling us what to do? Is he not Mary’s son?” These last words are not meant as mere facts. They’re actually an insult. At the time, it was considered extremely rude to refer to anyone only by the name of their mother. Both the mother’s and father’s name had to be used in polite company. Is this not a not-so-veiled slight, perhaps a reference to the circumstances of Jesus’ birth? What they may well have been saying was, “Is this not the illegitimate son of Mary?” It is safe to say that they must have been thinking something like this: “We know this fellow Jesus, and he’s not all he’s cracked up to be.” Mark tells us, “And they took offence at him” (Mark 6:3 NRSV). Jesus became a stumbling block for them.

The way Jesus reacted to their criticism is also significant. He could have caved in and given up right then and there. After all, this was his hometown. We all like to be admired and thought worthy of praise by those closest to us. This could have been an easy audience to please.

To make matters worse, Jesus knew that his family was not behind him. Some of them even thought he was losing his mind. To add insult to injury, there were upstanding citizens of his own hometown suggesting that he was an imposter. They were suggesting that he was someone who was pretending to be who he was not or worse. “Who does he think he is anyway?” Jesus could have buckled under the pressure. That could have been his last sermon and we would have never heard from him again. It would make perfect sense, given that Luke reports the people that day chased Jesus out of town, and even tried to throw him off a cliff. Somehow Jesus miraculously escaped.

“Then Jesus said to them, ‘Prophets are not without honour, except in their home- town, and among their own kin, and in their own house’ ” (Mark 6:4 NRSV). Today we put it like this: An expert is anyone fifty miles away from home. Or should I say, today an expert is someone anonymous on the internet. The wisdom of this teaching of Jesus came home to me once when I broke a basic rule of a priest, a friend begged me to step into a situation, with my particular wisdom, to help them out of the mess they had got themselves into. I tried and tried to refuse, but wanting to help I conceded. Almost from the beginning, all my intervention did was to make matters worse for me. I learned the hard way that sometimes with those who you think you know and help, no “turn is un-stoned”.

To ask once more the original question: Why? Why do things turn sour even when they begin so promisingly well? A lot has to do with the environment or atmosphere at the time. Certain happenings can bring out our true colours. Knowingly or unknowingly, Jesus walked into a hostile environment that sabbath when he walked into the synagogue with his disciples. The climate in that service that day reminds me of what some have called a toxic environment. A toxic environment has been described as a situation where there is stonewalling, criticism, blame, contempt, and defensiveness. All were present that day when Jesus got up to preach. His listeners did not care for what he had to say. They were not really listening to the big message but offended by the detail. Criticism and blame followed in good measure. Contempt and defensiveness brought the encounter to an end and as Mark puts it: “They took offence at him.”

The sad conclusion is that the environment was so bad that even Jesus could do nothing there. In Mark’s words, “And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief” (Mark 6:5-6 NRSV). Things had come full circle. In the beginning, those present in the synagogue were astonished at Jesus’ teachings. In the end, Jesus is the one who’s amazed at their unbelief.

Before Mark brings his gospel to a close, the rejection of Jesus will grow even greater. The circle of hostility will widen. There will be rejection not only by his own immediate family and the citizens of his hometown, but by leaders of his own nation. In the end, only the twelve and a handful of others will stand by Jesus of which five stood at the foot of the cross.

Next week we learn what Jesus did when things go bad, things turn sour? You go with what you have. You go with what's left. If you're like Jesus and you're not about to give up, you go with those who will go with you. You go with those who will accept the responsibility. You go with who's willing to carry on the mission. For Jesus, it was the twelve. He sent them out two by two. Probably for mutual support and comfort but more likely because at the time in Israel a single witness was not enough. Whatever the event was, it always required two people to vouch for the integrity of whatever took place.

Jesus knew all too well from this experience in the synagogue at Nazareth that his disciples could not always count on a warm reception. They might just land in a hostile environment as he had. They might find a toxic environment laced with stonewalling, criticism, blame, contempt, and defensiveness. If so they were to shake the dust off their feet as a testimony against them. Theirs was a sacred journey. They were to shake the dust off their feet, just as would be required when entering the temple in Jerusalem.

With these instructions, the disciples went out and proclaimed a gospel of repentance. Wonder of wonders, they were successful! As we will learn next week "They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them" (Mark 6:13 NRSV). This holy remnant launched a mission that continues to this day, right on down to you and me. Because when things turned sour, Jesus did not give up or give in, but decided to go with what he had. I believe it was none other than the great anthropologist, Margaret Mead, who remarked, "There is no way to stop a small group of committed people. They can change the world." Jesus and we, his modern-day disciples, are challenged to continue to prove that point right down to today.

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