

Prophets at home: Mark 6:1-13

The villagers of Nazareth knew Jesus, and they thought him to be nothing special.

by [George C. Heider](#) in the [June 30, 2009](#) issue

Jerry's phone call came as a pleasant blast from the past. He and I had attended elementary school together, but then my family moved 50 miles away and I hadn't seen Jerry for six years. Now we were about to "split for college," as he put it, and he proposed a party with our classmates. I borrowed the family station wagon and drove to the first-and-only Stephen Knolls Elementary School Class of 1965 reunion. We caught up with one another, enjoyed a picnic, played some games and headed off into our lives. I haven't seen or heard from any of any of them in the 40 years since.

What a difference one's time, place and culture make! Throughout the world and through the ages, it has been far more common to be born, grow up, marry and work, raise a family and die within a relatively restricted geographical area and social circle. We sophisticates may chuckle when we watch Stephen Daldry's film *Billy Elliot* and learn that Billy's father has never been to London or that Billy himself has never even visited the famous cathedral in his hometown, but their reality—not our hypermobility—is the world's norm.

That norm is what we find in today's Gospel reading. In Mark's Gospel Jesus had so far undertaken his life's mission in the environs of Galilee, once venturing as far as the other side of the sea to the region of the Decapolis, where gentiles predominated. But he hadn't wandered all that far from his hometown of Nazareth. Comments scattered within the synoptics (Matt. 4:23-25; Mark 1:28, 45; Luke 4:14-15) indicate that he had begun to develop a reputation as a preacher and miracle worker. On the whole, Mark's telling gives one the sense that Jesus' visit to his hometown had the air of the mundane about it.

Those whom Jesus began to teach in the synagogue in Nazareth had known him all of his life. Their reaction is therefore telling: they were "astounded" (*exeplessonto*),

which according to its New Testament usage could be a good or a bad thing. The words with which they expressed their astonishment are similarly open to interpretation: “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are done by his hands!” Yet their final words reveal that they smelled something fishy (besides several of his disciples): “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?” Finally we are told explicitly: “They took offense at him.”

New Testament scholars inform us that the problem here is one of culture: in an honor/shame society, it was an act of sheer arrogance for someone of Jesus’ lowly origins to speak out publicly. The villagers of Nazareth knew Jesus, and they thought him to be nothing special. His mother and siblings lived among them and they were ordinary folk. Jesus was a journeyman carpenter at best, not a sage or dignitary, and his apparent ability to perform “deeds of power” like healings simply didn’t add up. So “they took offense at him.”

In fact, Mark tells us, their unbelief worked a negative miracle of sorts (captured in what certainly is the most puzzling line in the reading): “He could do no deed of power there.” (Well, Mark concedes, he slipped in a few random healings, but nothing like what all the shouting was about three verses earlier.) It was Jesus’ turn to be astounded: “He was amazed (*ethaumazen*) at their unbelief.”

I leave to the systematic theologians to work out how Jesus’ abilities could be so delimited. I observe only that what happened here is hardly unique to ancient denizens of villages whose horizons scarcely exceeded the surrounding fields, or to those whose culture is far less individualistic than our own. The fact is that we too have an awful time truly listening to and seeing God at work in those whom we think we know well. That’s true of pastors listening to other pastors preach. (If we’re not sitting as homiletical judges, we’re mindful of the preacher’s personal foibles.) That’s true of both pastors and laity as they move past the honeymoon period and confront the issues that inevitably arise in human communities.

Wherein lies hope and a way forward? One option is suggested as the Gospel reading continues: Jesus turned his focus to equipping others and enabling them to do what he could not accomplish at home. Those exorcised and otherwise cured could hardly complain if they received healing at the hands of a disciple rather than from the Master himself.

But there may be another point too—subtle yet present. Three additional times in Mark’s Gospel there are references to “Jesus of Nazareth.” They come at pivotal points in the narrative: the segue to his entry into Jerusalem, the contexts of his trial and the empty tomb. One could say that these are merely conventional references from a time when surnames were not used by peasants. Or just maybe they are reminders that Jesus retained a special affection for those who knew him best, despite the incident in Mark 6, in that he remained identified with them. We don’t know if he ever saw the people of Nazareth again. But surely he never forgot them, and it can be no accident that he promises to return to the vicinity of his hometown for any postresurrection reunions.