

In today's Gospel of St. Mark, after being away for a year and a half, Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth where He grew up. Perhaps many memories danced in His mind about His childhood friends, the home He lived in, and the carpenter shop where His father had patiently taught Him the carpentry trade. The people knew Jesus, knew His family, and remembered thinking that He was an ordinary person just like themselves.

Jesus had been the village craftsman until he left to go to John the Baptist in the desert to be baptized. He had been long enough in the village to firmly establish His identity as "*the carpenter*" in the eyes of the people of Nazareth. But now their image of Jesus has changed. Jesus is now teaching with *authority* and He is performing deeds that require great power. *What is going on?* Jesus is no longer the ordinary man who left Nazareth a year and a half ago.

The people see the change when they invite Jesus to read and teach in the synagogue. Scripture says that the people "*were astounded*" and they say, "*where did this man get all of this knowledge?*" Notice that they now call Jesus "*this man.*" He is no longer the person they knew by the name of "*Jesus.*"

The people then begin to reject Jesus and His message of God's love and salvation for all people. Jesus tells them the same things He told His other listeners, of the need to change, to repent and to be converted if they want to enjoy the fruits of the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom He claims has come with Himself. But the people who knew Him before are unable to accept the truth of Jesus' message and His own people are now rejecting Him.

Have *you yourself* ever felt rejected by someone? As most of us can attest to, rejection can be *very painful and harmful*. It hurts, and it hurts deeply. Many people who are gathered around this Table of the Lord today have felt rejection either by someone in their family, or by a friend, or by someone in our community, or by someone at work or school.

When rejection occurs, it's very easy for the rejected person to lose heart. It's very easy to give up. It's very easy to stop loving. And . . . it's a time when it's *also* very

easy to grow angry. It's very easy to become bitter and resentful. People who are rejected feel deeply wounded and broken inside with a pain that rips their hearts apart.

How does Jesus respond to the people's rejection? The answer is found in the last passage of today's Gospel, "*Then Jesus went about among the village teaching.*" Jesus did not let rejection from those in His hometown stop Him from continuing His mission of God's love and salvation to all people. Jesus continues to speak the truth. St. Mark's community in our Gospel reading does not let rejection stop them from loving God, and loving those who have persecuted them. The community continues the ministry and mission of Jesus in spite of their threats of death.

The message from today's Gospel is that we can imitate Jesus and we can imitate the community of St. Mark. With God's grace always there to help us, we can go on doing our best to accept people no matter how many times we are rejected. When Jesus was rejected and nailed to the cross and died, He rose from the dead and He kept on loving people. Often through misunderstanding from our family and friends, or because of our faith in Jesus, we will feel rejection and we may feel nailed to the cross.

On the other side of the coin, how often do we ourselves reject someone else, perhaps through gossip, anger, silence, prejudice, unbelief and unkind words? How often do we fail to see the goodness of God reflected in those around us? Whether we are always conscious of it or not, each day we are meeting God in each person, place and moment that comes our way. The trouble is that, because people are so close to one another, they only tend to see the faults and not the image of God in the person.

Jesus tells us to keep God's laws to love "*your neighbour as yourself.*" That is a tall order. Who of us can say we have loved our neighbour as ourselves? God calls us to change the way we look at people. Not to label them. All people become our neighbours in the kingdom of God.

Jesus came to draw all people to Himself. He did not reject anyone who came to Him. This non-exclusivity is demonstrated vividly by those whom He calls to Himself: the coarse fishermen, greedy tax collectors, and prostitutes. In Jesus' view, everyone is our neighbour. To love one's neighbour is to abolish all boundaries, all divisions. The Gospel is at pains to emphasize that there is no love of God without having love of our neighbour. Let's view people differently; let's view them as we do ourselves.