

Mark 6

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[0 : 0 0] Well, let's turn to Mark chapter 6, and the chapter begins with this reference to Jesus returning to his hometown. And even as I read those words and pictured the scene of Jesus returning to his hometown, the image that generated by that idea of going home is quite a pleasant one. We all, I think, enjoy going home, especially if we've been away for a long period of time. Some of you, perhaps, home is very far away, and the opportunities to go home are limited, but when they do appear, they're treasured and valued and look forward to. There is a certain romance associated with a journey home. And even as I did give some thought to that, the words that came to my mind are from a song that celebrates its golden anniversary this year. And when I tell you what song it is, it will make many of you feel very old. But it celebrates its golden anniversary, and it's

Homeward Bound by Simon and Garfunkel, a song so old that it is even before my era, although I'm familiar with it as I'm sure many of you are. It's 50 years since the album that that song was on came out. Homeward Bound, I wish I was homeward bound for my thoughts escaping, home where my music's playing, home where my love lies waiting silently for me. All those images of heading home, of being homeward bound. In contrast to that, in our passage, Jesus is heading home, and the experience of heading home proves to be anything but romantic. And what I think we can do, or what I want us to do this morning, is to draw out from these few verses in chapter 6 of Mark's Gospel, three portraits of Jesus from the passage.

And think about each of them in turn. I think we find in these verses a portrait of one we might call an ordinary Jesus, an ordinary Jesus. But then, perhaps at the heart of what we discover about Jesus here is that He proves to be an offensive Jesus. And there is a link between each of these portraits. It's His very ordinariness that leads to Him being offensive to many. An ordinary Jesus, an offensive Jesus, an offensive Jesus. But then, perhaps the most shocking of all, we're presented with what appears to be a powerless Jesus. Three portraits of Jesus, all of them shocking in their own way. How can we speak of the eternal Son of God as ordinary? How can we conceive of the most loving man who ever lived as offensive? And how can we dare even suggest that the Creator of the universe is powerless? Well, bear with me as we think about how these indeed are, in some measure, the portraits that we find of Jesus in these verses. First of all, then, an ordinary Jesus. Everything that we read here in these verses, and of course, not only here but throughout the Gospels, presents to us, presents to us Jesus as an altogether ordinary man. If we just think of the material that we have in these few verses, we can notice that He hailed from an ordinary town. Jesus left there, verse 1, and went to His hometown. Now, we know that His hometown was Nazareth. Indeed, in this very gospel, the demons have already identified Him as Jesus of Nazareth. That is where He was from. That was His hometown. Some of you will remember what Nathanael famously said about Nazareth. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? There in John's gospel in the first chapter, Nazareth. Nazareth was indeed a very forgettable, obscure hamlet. It's not mentioned in the Old Testament. Outside of the New Testament, the first recorded reference to Nazareth is by an obscure writer by the name of Julius Africanus some two centuries after Jesus' birth. You'd have thought that given that it was the hometown of Jesus, it might have known a little bit more fame.

But even subsequent to Jesus' life, it was largely forgotten. There have been archaeological excavations on what is deemed to be and thought to be the site of ancient Nazareth. And the outcome of those excavations lead those who have studied these things to conclude that it was a very small hamlet of earthen dwellings carved into 60 acres of rocky hillside in Galilee with a total population of maybe 500 people at most. And indeed, of those 500 people, we would imagine, given what Matthew says of Galilee, he describes Galilee as Galilee of the Gentiles, perhaps many

of the population in Nazareth when Jesus was growing up. He was part of a family in verse 3 when the townspeople of Nazareth are confronted with this son who is returning home to the village. And they're struck by what they've heard about him and now what they hear of him. What do they say? Well, they make reference to the family that he is part of. Verse 3, isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James,

[6 : 23] Joseph, Judas, and Simon, and his sisters here with us? He's just part of an ordinary family. We know his family. We know his brothers. We know his sisters. We know his nephews, his nieces. They're right here. They live here.

There's nothing special about them. It's just an ordinary family. Of course, this is what causes such offense that one from such an ordinary family would be saying the things that he said and doing the things that he did. It is the very ordinariness of Jesus's family that is striking for those who were from that very town. But then also we can say that Jesus was trained in an ordinary profession. In verse 3, we've already read it, but it begins with this question that they pose. Of course, they know the answer to the question, isn't this the carpenter? Now, the word there that's translated carpenter is a word that can have a broader meaning or can be used to describe other manual labor, a builder, a stonemason. It's not necessarily one that is limited to working with wood, though it can be used of carpenters. Now, let me be very clear. There is, of course, no shame associated with manual labor, but Jesus' trade was, by any measure, ordinary. Just of anecdotal interest, there's a curious second-century exchange between Celsus, who was an opponent of the Christian faith and wrote in quite virulent terms against it, and Origen, who was one of the early church fathers who responded to the attacks of Celsus. And within the attacks that he made in the Christian faith, Celsus attacked it on this ground that its founder was only a carpenter. And you can imagine the mocking tones, how can we take seriously a religion whose founder was a carpenter? But the curious thing is that Origen, in defending the Christian faith, makes the claim that nowhere in the Gospels is Jesus described as a carpenter. And you might say, well, that's strange. Are we not seeing that here? Well, curiously, there is a textual debate here as to whether what we have in the original is, isn't this the carpenter or isn't this the son of the carpenter? Both of which would, of course, have been true. Now, the point isn't really whether what was originally written is as we find it here in our text, but simply that Origen would have felt it necessary to somehow defend Jesus against this accusation that he was just a carpenter. Of course, no such defense was necessary. That's what he was. He was an ordinary man from an ordinary town, from an ordinary family, engaged in ordinary work as a carpenter. He was also, and there's some hint at this, though it's not stated explicitly in our passage. He was educated in an ordinary school, presumably there in the very synagogue in Nazareth, where he was now teaching and generating the response that he generates.

And what would the synagogue in Nazareth have been like? Now, I'm sure the Jews were far too sensible than to have league tables comparing different synagogues. We know that the synagogues were used as day schools, effectively, there in Israel. And as I say, I'm sure they didn't have league tables, but if they'd had league tables, I can't imagine that the synagogue in Nazareth would have figured very high on the list of synagogues where children could be educated and taught. And of course, the very people who lived in Nazareth knew that, and that's why they asked the question, what's this wisdom?

[10 : 33] He didn't learn that here. We know what's taught here. He didn't learn that here. Our children were taught by the same man that he was taught by, and they don't know what he knows. They don't teach like he teaches.

Just an ordinary education. Indeed, the great and the good would have considered that he wasn't educated at all. Remember the time when he was at an altogether different location in the temple in Jerusalem, not just some forgettable synagogue in Nazareth and Galilee, but in the temple in Jerusalem, and he was teaching. And the great and the good, when they heard what he said, concluded with this question, how did this man get such learning without having studied? You see, as far as they were concerned, he hadn't studied at all. He hadn't been under some prominent rabbi as a student, and so effectively he was deemed to be an uneducated man, and yet he was able to teach, giving evidence of great learning. An ordinary man. Now, you might be thinking, well, yes, all of these things are true, but surely the people who were closest to him, surely the people who grew up with him, his brothers, his sisters, his neighbors, those in the synagogue in Nazareth, surely they must have seen something different, something special about Jesus as he grew up.

Well, maybe in some measure they did, but what we read here in chapter 6 suggests otherwise. This trip to Nazareth is anything to go by. They didn't think that Jesus was anything other than another ordinary man. He was, then, by any number of measures, just plain ordinary. He was boringly normal. He was mundanely human. And, of course, this fact only serves to highlight that this ordinary man was the product of an extraordinary incarnation. You see, this ordinary man is God incarnate. And I know that to be a true statement. And I imagine that most of us here this morning would also confidently echo that that is a true statement. Jesus, God incarnate. And yet, even though we know it to be true, when we pause and think about it, the very notion seems quite incredible, how can it be that this man is God incarnate? You really couldn't make this up. If somebody had wanted to make this up, I can't imagine they would have come up with such a concoction, come up with such a description of one such as we have here. And I think there are two aspects of the incarnation that I think the ordinariness of Jesus serves to highlight. One obvious aspect that it highlights is the extent of the incarnation. Jesus became fully human. He was a real, ordinary man, such as He has portrayed for us in the Gospels. But then that, in turn, leads to another aspect, and that is the wonder of it. The wonder of it, the creator of the universe living as a child in a house made of mud in a backwater in Palestine. The one who fashioned the stars and placed them in the firmament, fashioning rustic doors and placing them in their modest frames. The eternal Son of God who knows all things and has eternally known all things, sitting in the dust at the feet of an untrained teacher in the synagogue in Nazareth, being taught to read and write. The wonder of it all. And this is the one we worship, an ordinary Jesus.

As we continue reading the passage, we're also presented with another portrait, and it follows on from the first one, and that is the portrait of an offensive Jesus. Notice what is said there in verse three in the second half of the verse. The townspeople of Nazareth, having reminded themselves of just who he was and of how ordinary he was. We read, and they took offense at him. They were offended by his very ordinariness. And their offense, of course, led to their rejection of Jesus. We need to just spend a moment distinguishing between those who took offense and why they took offense. And our first concern is those who took offense as described here in the passage. He was rejected in his own town.

[15 : 56] And in the passage, we can notice, we might describe as three concentric circles of affinity, and he is rejected by all three. Notice what is said there by Jesus as he acknowledges what is happening. Jesus said to them, only in his hometown, Nazareth, the town itself, rejects him.

Among his relatives. So within that town, there were those who were relatives of Jesus. They too rejected. And in his own house, among his closest family members, the brothers and sisters who are mentioned by name, they also reject him. Rejected by those who know him best. And we can detect in the language that the people who are not. And we can detect in the language that the people use.

A disparaging tone. Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son? Where did this man get these things? This man?

It's always dangerous maybe to imagine the tone of voice that is being used, but doesn't it come across to you as disparaging in tone? Who is this man? Who does he think he is? We know him. We know him.

And so they reject him. And they take offense at him. And there's also possibly the cruel undertones of Jesus being identified by the people of Nazareth as Mary's son. There in verse 3. Isn't this Mary's son? Why is he described as Mary's son? Why not described as Joseph's son? That would be the ordinary way of designating a Jew by his father. Why is he spoken of as Mary's son? Now, one suggested explanation, and it may be the one that explains the language that they use, is that at this point, Joseph had died. We don't know if Joseph had died, that the weight of evidence would seem to suggest that he probably had by this stage. We don't know. But even if he had died, this is an unusual way to describe Jesus. Even if Joseph was dead, the ordinary way of speaking of him would have been as Joseph's son. So why Mary's son? Well, isn't there here perhaps this veiled accusation that he was illegitimate? They all knew it really, that Joseph wasn't the father. And so they speak of him as Mary's son. Well, that may be or may not be. We can't know for sure. But as we just think about that, as we think about these people in Nazareth, his own home, his relatives, his hometown, taking offense at Jesus and rejecting Jesus. As we think about that, I think it is worth pondering on that and just recognizing that it is often those who know him best who reject him most.

[19 : 14] And that wasn't only 2,000 years ago. I think that's still true today. Those who know him best are often those who reject him most. And that's a solemn warning for any here who may be so foolish as to be rejecting Jesus. You know all about him. You've been brought up hearing about him at home, at Sunday school, at church. You know so much about him, and yet you choose to reject him.

But I wonder if it also guides us or ought to guide us in our own evangelistic efforts. Is it not the case that often we imagine as we seek to reach out and bring others to form part of the congregation and see growth in our church? We think, well, people with church connections, there's a good place to start. See if we can find people with church connections. Now, I don't think we should dismiss people with church connections. They need the gospel as much as anybody else. But I think it is worth pondering on this reality that we so often see, that those who know him best reject him most.

Maybe it's only fair to give opportunity to those who know him very little. Rejected in his hometown. But also, Jesus, of course, was rejected not only in Nazareth, but he was rejected in many towns. And I don't want to wander from our passage. Time doesn't allow us. But it is striking how Mark uses the same verb that is translated here, they took offense. And the Greek verb here is, I'll mention it only because you'll recognize it, and so it serves a purpose. The Greek verb is skandalizo. And it's from that word that we get our word scandal, to scandalize. They were scandalized by him. They were offended by him. It's a word that Mark uses on a number of occasions throughout his gospel to describe how all manner of men were offended by and rejected Jesus. And for different reasons. Some were offended by his person, by his character. Some by his teaching. Some by his claims, or the claims that were made about him. Some by the demands that he would impose on those who would follow him. All manner of reasons why people were offended by him. And as a result, he was a stumbling block to them. A stumbling block to proud sinners. So he's rejected in Nazareth. He's rejected time and again in town after town.

But it's also striking that the one who is rejected by man is the one who is chosen by God. You see, this rejection is foreseen, indeed foreordained by the Father, indeed prized by the Father. And in that regard, it is striking how the same word, skandalizo, is used to describe Jesus in Peter's first letter.

[22 : 20] Let's just turn quickly to 1 Peter and chapter 2 and read without much comment what is said there concerning Jesus. In 1 Peter, chapter 2, and we'll read from verse 4.

As you come to him, the living stone, rejected by men, but chosen by God and precious to him, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says, see, see, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame. Now to you who believe, this stone is precious, but to those who do not believe, the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone, and a stone that causes men to stumble, and a rock that makes them fall, or a rock of offense, where this same word is used by Peter.

Rejected by men, but chosen by God. Well, what will you do with Jesus? Will you, with the townspeople of Nazareth, reject him, or will you put your trust in him and discover that as you do, you will never be put to shame? To take the assurances of Peter in the verses that we've just read. An ordinary Jesus, an offensive Jesus, but finally let's look at one further portrait, and again it follows really logically, or I don't know if logically, but sequentially in the passage, and that is we have painted for us a portrait of a powerless Jesus. What does Mark say there in verse 5 as he describes the occasion, this visit to Nazareth, and what happened there? Well, this is what he says, Jesus could not do any miracles there. He goes on, but that's how he begins his sentence. He could not do any miracles there. I think by any measure that is a shocking statement by Mark. And just to put it in context, to appreciate just how shocking it is, let's remind ourselves of what, according to Mark, and we've been going through Mark, it's familiar to us, what Jesus has been doing.

[24 : 48] Well, Jesus has been exercising his authority and demonstrating his power in a multiplicity of ways. He's healed the sick. He's cast out demons. He's forgiven sin. He calmed the storm. He raised the dead to life. He has been doing all of these things. He is, if you'll forgive the flippancy of the expression, he's on a roll as we come to this chapter 6 of Mark. All of what he's done, all of the ways he's demonstrated his power and authority. And then we come to Nazareth. Of all places, we come to Nazareth.

And Mark tells us that he could not do any miracles there. He presents us with what we might describe as a powerless Jesus. And I want us to just think about three aspects of this disturbing, maybe confusing reality. First of all, to think about the difficulty of what Mark says, but then to think about what the explanation is. But then finally, and this will close, the challenge to us today and now. First of all, the difficulty. And the difficulty, of course, is theological. How can Mark speak of Jesus in these terms? We have to be very clear that this is what Mark does say. Mark says he could not do any miracles there. How could such words ever be applied to Jesus? Surely Jesus is the very Son of God, very God of very God. Surely he can do anything. What are we to make of a Jesus who is rendered impotent by the rejection of a few villagers in Nazareth? This is the difficulty that we're confronted with by what Mark tells us. How do we understand it? What explanation can we find? Now Mark doesn't, in his account, at least not explicitly give an explanation for why Jesus could not do any miracles there. But I think he implicitly gives us a hint as to why that was in what he goes on to say in verse 6, and he was amazed at their lack of faith. He doesn't use any language which says, well, the reason for this is because of, but you might argue that that is implicit in what he says. However, though Mark is less than explicit, Matthew does make a connection, a very causal connection between these two things, the lack of faith of the people in Nazareth and Jesus not being able to perform the miracles that he had been performing. So, if we just quickly notice what Matthew says in Matthew chapter 13, in the parallel passage in Matthew 13 and in verse 58, there you notice that the section is really very similar to the one in Mark's gospel. But there in verse 58 we read, and he did not do many miracles there. He didn't say he could not. Mark uses more cautious language, you might say, but he says he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith. So, there Mark makes the connection in a very explicit way. Now, that's an explanation, and that's good. It's good to have an explanation, but it doesn't altogether solve the problem. We're still left, even though it's explained why, we're still left with, it would appear, a powerless Jesus, victim of the faithlessness of the people in Nazareth. I think to resolve this difficulty, if we can call it that, we need to notice two things. The first thing to notice, it's just a simple point, but it's an important one, is that Mark acknowledges that Jesus was able to do some miracles even in Nazareth. Because there in verse 5 of chapter 6 we read, he could not do any miracles there except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. Now, I don't know about you, but I smile at the understated way that Mark speaks of the healing of a few sick people. Wasn't that great? You know, just a few sick people. It seems pretty amazing to me. But Mark clearly is acknowledging that the degree to which Jesus demonstrated his power and exercised his authority was in far greater degree than had been the case elsewhere. He was still capable of doing miracles. That's evidenced by the miracles that he did perform, but there's a reason, it would seem, why he did not. So, he was able to do miracles. But the other thing is that we can say this, that the inability or powerlessness of Jesus, if we can use that language, is self-imposed. Jesus, of his own sovereign prerogative, determined to ordinarily perform such miracles in response to the faith of those seeking his miraculous intervention. Now, he wasn't bound by that. There are occasions when he performs his miracles in the absence of faith, when you think of even in what we've seen in Mark's gospel, when he calmed the storm.

The disciples didn't believe he was going to do that, but he still did it. He wasn't bound by this *modus operandi*, if you wish, but ordinarily he would perform his miracles in response to the faith of those seeking his help. And of course, here he does not find that. In fact, what he finds is quite the opposite. He's rejected by his own people, and as a result, he is unable to perform the miracles that he had performed elsewhere. This is not an absolute powerlessness, but a self-imposed powerlessness.

[30 : 57] But then that takes us to the challenge. I wonder if in this shocking statement of Mark, we can discover, detect a diagnosis for our own powerlessness and ineffectiveness in evangelism, in our fruitlessness often as believers and as a congregation. Now, before I develop that thought, let me just acknowledge that the parallel is not an exact one. The unbelief of the citizens of Nazareth is not the same as the lack of faith that perhaps characterizes or does characterize many of us. It's not the same. It's not an exact parallel. Their unbelief, the unbelief that Jesus is amazed by, as Mark says in verse 6, is unbelief that led them to reject Jesus. And we don't reject Jesus. We may be guilty of many things, but those of us who by the grace of God are believers here this morning, we don't reject Jesus.

We love Jesus. And yet I wonder if the underlying principle that we find here in Nazareth is applicable, that Jesus ordinarily acts in supernatural power, in life-changing power, in transforming power in response to faith. And so I ask the question, and I invite you to think about this question. Why do we not see men and women being saved here in the congregation as a regular occurrence? Because we don't. We don't see them. Why is our growth, what growth there is, almost entirely due to procreation and the assimilation of existing believers who make Bon Accord their home? And let me be very clear. I thank God for our covenant children who embrace the faith and enrich our fellowship. We thank God for them.

I welcome with open arms and thank God for those who become part of our congregation from other countries and other traditions. We thank you for your contribution. We welcome you to be part of us. But the question still stands, why do we not see people being saved? Why do we not see people being converted? Why do we not see people who have never heard the gospel, hearing the gospel, and putting their trust in Jesus? Why is that?

Might there be something of an answer, or part of the answer? Might there be a hint as to what the answer might be in this passage that we're looking at this morning?

[33 : 35] In these sobering words of Mark concerning Jesus, he could not do any miracles there. Might it be that Jesus is amazed by our lack of faith?

Now how can we know if we lack faith? I think there are questions we can ask that would help us diagnose ourselves. Do you ask God to save your colleagues? Is that something you pray for? Is that something you do? Do you pray to God to bring to faith those you work with day by day? Are you even asking? Do you ask God to give you opportunities to speak to your neighbors in the hope that you might be able to share with them something of the good news of Jesus, that they would hear and understand and believe? Would you even consider inviting an unsaved friend to our Easter services in two weeks' time?

Will you walk out of church this morning saying there's no point in me taking those invitations because I've got nobody to invite because none of my friends will ever become Christians? Is that your default position? I pose the question and I pose it to myself.

Is there a problem here regarding our lack of faith? Do we make use of the opportunities to pray together, pleading with God that he would pour out his spirit in convicting and converting power?

[34 : 57] These are the kind of questions that can help us to determine if we lack faith or if this lack of faith is an issue. A powerless Jesus.

Well, these are three striking, even shocking portraits of Jesus that we find in these verses in Mark chapter 6. An ordinary Jesus.

And what do we do with our ordinary Jesus? Well, we stand back in awestruck wonder at such spectacular condescension that the eternal Son of God became such an ordinary man.

That he might save us. Ordinary men and women like you and me. An offense of Jesus. Are you offended by his claims or the demands that he places on your life?

Has for you, in some measure, familiarity bred contempt. Will you reject him or will you put your trust in him?

[36 : 03] A powerless Jesus. Now, we gladly and joyfully acknowledge that Jesus is altogether powerful. And yet, does our lack of faith constitute a stumbling block to the work of God in our own lives, in the lives of others, and across the city to which God has called us to witness and serve?

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for the Bible. We thank you for your word. We thank you that it speaks to us and speaks into our lives and into our own circumstances and situation.

And we acknowledge that we sometimes struggle to define the application to our lives. And sometimes we don't manage to do that.

We go in the wrong direction. And so, we do pray that you would be the one who would be guiding us and directing us, even as we consider the passage before us, even as we ponder on these thoughts in our minds, in what follows in the rest of this day and beyond, that you would be the one, by your Spirit, leading us to your truth and to what you have to say to us.

Heavenly Father, we pray then for the continuing work of your Spirit in us and amongst us. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.