

Dust and disciples Mark 6: 1-13

I hate housework. Well maybe not all housework. I am happy mopping floors and cleaning bathrooms, I am absolutely fine when an overflowing basket of ironing presents itself and changing beds is always good when lovely clean crisp sheets are awaiting a lovely nights sleep but I hate vacuuming and I hate dusting.

No matter how much I vacuum or dust, there always seems to be a bit I have missed or mysteriously the next day everything looks as bad as before. It is especially noticeable in sunny days when the rays of light beaming through the windows seems to catch every dust mote floating in the air before alighting on my newly polished surfaces.

I hate dusting.

So when I read our lectionary reading for this Sunday I was drawn to the verse describing 'shake the dust off your feet'. I had a vision of sandalled feet waving in the air as sand and grit and feathery dust mites were thrown off into the distance hoping the wind direction would not change and see them covered in the debris. And I speak as one who stupidly threw ashes from the fire into the bin just as the breeze got up and ended with conjunctivitis.

But after I had imagined my little dusty drama, I began to look at the reasons for this very firm command from Jesus. Again we are not always used to Jesus speaking in anything less than gentle, loving, welcoming words so perhaps this verse jars with us somewhat?

It follows on as a direct consequence from Jesus returning to his hometown of Nazareth. The evidence in the preceding chapters suggests Jesus teaching and healing ministry was well received and wanted. A miraculous healing had occurred in the house of the leader of the synagogue so all the signs pointed to another successful visit to the Nazarene synagogue where Jesus and his family were well known. At the start the teaching begins with a familiar pattern – Jesus is invited to teach on the sabbath and most likely the same scripture and prophecies were explained and we are told the people were amazed. So far this is very like other experiences but Mark goes on to explain that the people's astonishment is not because of the wisdom and discernment of which Jesus spoke but rather the astonishment lay in Jesus himself.

A hometown boy from a small village town, his listeners would have known all about his family – they rattle off the names of his brothers, they remind one another that even his sisters are still living in the area and the unspoken thing but clearly alluded to is the scandal of Jesus

birth. No father is mentioned in this account from Mark which is telling in itself. Here was the undercurrent of illegitimacy and disgrace. It was not on account of Jesus teaching that he was rejected but because of his family background. And even Jesus himself was shocked by this lack of faith, this short-sightedness that prevented the people who knew him best from receiving the amazing gift he was offering them.

Furthermore, the absence of faith seemed to challenge Jesus' ability to perform healing miracles. At first, the text indicated that he *could not do* anything there (6:5); then, the author corrected himself by adding an exception.

On the one hand, it was clear that Jesus' healing authority was intimately interrelated with the faith of others. On the other hand, Jesus could overcome the absence of faith when he desired to do so. Throughout the story, Mark promoted faith as a critical element in the healing mission of Jesus. But faith was not *essential*. Faith was not a necessary condition in any absolute sense. God's freedom cannot be limited in that way. So Jesus placed his hands on the few sick people who came to him and they were healed.

At this point Jesus could have reacted in a variety of ways. He may have decided to double down in his teaching and healing – try to win the crowd over – attempt to get his home crowd on side. He could have thrown the head up and said well that's it – I'm done – Ive done my

best and now I'm off to lick my wounds or he could choose to continue in the mission His father had given him to do. So hurt and confused as Jesus undoubtedly was, by the response from those who should have known him better, he chose to continue in the ministry of sharing the Good news and proclaiming the kingdom of God.

In many ways, the opposition and rejection Jesus encountered in Nazareth may have been the catalyst to the widening of his outreach. Leaving Nazareth, Jesus and his disciples stayed in the area but went out into the neighbouring villages. Two by two they were encouraged to take only what they needed and travel into the surrounding countryside, focusing on households which welcomed them. And then comes Jesus parting piece of advice. If you are welcomed then stay but if you are not welcomed or the people do not listen to you then leave and shake the dust off your feet.

And the final verse we read today tells us that this ministry, this mission outreach was successful, the disciples faithfully healed, taught repentance and forgiveness and drove out demons but to do that they also had to be prepared to shake the dust off their feet – prepared to be rejected – but ready to move on to where their ministry would be received with joy and welcome.

Shaking the dust off their feet – that is a really harsh action symbolising that all that can be done has been done and the bearer now carries no

further responsibility. Shaking the dust off their feet was in effect saying that everyone was free to choose what they believed but those who rejected God's truth would no longer be allowed to hinder the furtherance of the Gospel or the mission Jesus had come to fulfil. And in the light of that understanding those dust mites take on a much greater symbolism and truth than simply shaking out a duster.

These last 18 months of the pandemic have been challenging, painful, bewildering and unsettling but much as we would like to click a switch and have everything return to normal that cannot happen. Nor should it happen. I believe if we choose to learn nothing from this lifechanging experience then we are doing a great disservice to our own witness in Newtownbreda and not keeping faith with the vision God has placed in his people within this congregation.

So we have to acknowledge that there may be aspects of our mission, ministry and outreach that also need to have the dust shaken off them.

What activities have now run their course and need to be reimaged or recreated to give more possibility and potential to meeting the needs of congregation and community?

What projects need to be dropped in order to give resources and energy to the new thing that has been recognised in this time of transition and transformation?

What traditions need to be shaken up in order to better relate to our 21st century members and stronger, deeper relationships formed?

Where are the really dusty places that need a good cleaning and light to fall upon them?

This is a lifelong challenge for each of us and Kirk Session have begun to look at this in relation to 4 specific areas. Our ongoing digital presence, pastoral care, reaching out to young families and our wider vision for mission within our congregation and community. Four working groups have been set up and the convenors of those groups are looking for insight, ideas, imagination and energy from you the congregation – old and young, newer member or life long attender, all backgrounds – this is not limited to session and committee member – all are needed.

So in the following weeks and months I would encourage everyone – both here in church and watching at home to consider what you could offer in this planning and faithful journeying. Shaking off the dust is always a tricky activity – it can be painful – remember my ash story – but when the dust is cleared we find clean surfaces, fresh starts, more space and the energy to go forward.

So this morning, as disciples of Jesus Christ I am asking everyone to get their dusters out.