

One of my favorite summer activities is driving all over our beautiful New England countryside and just enjoying the small towns that make up so much of our region. Occasionally, as you enter a town, you'll find, somewhere near the town line, a sign boasting of that town's state championship football or basketball teams. In other towns, it might be the birthplace of someone famous. In either case, the idea is the same. The signs brag about a local boy or girl who made a name for the town in the wider world.

It seems natural to us for local folks to brag on their hometown heroes. But this morning's Gospel reading presents us with a very different scene. Jesus is *not* welcomed in his own hometown. This strikes me as a little jarring. How could Jesus not be welcomed in Nazareth? I mean, hello! He is known throughout the ages as "Jesus of...where?...Nazareth." It is the ultimate story of a "local boy doing good." The carpenter's son from a small town in the rural backwater province of Galilee turns out to be the Son of God through whom redemption comes for the whole world.

Now if any town should throw a parade to welcome its hometown hero, it ought to be Nazareth. But that's not the way it went down. No, instead, Jesus began his ministry on the road. He left Nazareth and went out to his cousin John who was baptizing in the Jordan River. There, the Holy Spirit came upon him, he was baptized, and his ministry began. After retreating to the desert for 40 days and overcoming temptation, Jesus returned to Galilee with the Good News that the Kingdom of God had come near. Jesus called his first disciples on his return to Galilee. Then Jesus set up a base of operations in Capernaum, the hometown of those first disciples: Simon Peter, his brother Andrew, and the sons of Zebedee, James and John.

Jesus began to travel around the region of Galilee preaching and healing. Jesus' family back in Nazareth gets word of his new line of work and they get worried. Three chapters before today's reading, Mark's Gospel records that Jesus' family tries to restrain him. People are worried that he's gone out of his mind. You can be sure that news of all this soon reached Nazareth. This was *not* a story of a local boy making it in the wider world. They feared that Jesus of Nazareth had gone off the religious deep end and would soon disgrace their town.

Despite the "buzz" back home, Jesus continued his ministry of preaching and healing. Last week we read about how Jesus raised a synagogue leader's daughter from the dead and healed a woman who'd been hemorrhaging for 12 years. All this was on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Now Jesus returns to Nazareth. It's the Sabbath and all the faithful Jews of Nazareth are in the synagogue. Jesus asks to read and comment on the

scripture for the day and is given the go-ahead. Can you imagine the buzz around the synagogue that morning as everyone realized that Jesus was going to speak?

Jesus was no stranger to these people. Jesus grew up among them. Jesus' life was an open book for the other people in this small town. The people of Nazareth knew about Jesus' early years. Sure, he was a respected carpenter, but Jesus was no Rabbi, from what these people knew of him. With all the talk that had filtered in from the surrounding towns about the things Jesus had taught and the miracles he performed, the people must have been curious to see this new Jesus for themselves. This was no carpenter returning to work, but a traveling miracle worker come to town.

As Jesus taught, the people listened to his words about the Kingdom of God come near. He called them to repent and believe in the Good News. But the Good News Jesus offered was too much for the people of Nazareth to swallow. He might have gotten straight "A"s at Nazareth Elementary, but that didn't qualify him for "Son of God." The crowd asked, "Where did this man get all this?"

As you can imagine, Jesus was amazed at their unbelief. In the midst of the doubts and fears of Nazareth, Jesus could only cure a few of the sick people of Nazareth. He continued on his mission around Galilee, leaving his hometown behind. Jesus of Nazareth was no longer welcome *in* Nazareth.

Where is the Good News for *us* in this story? If Jesus wasn't seen to be the Son of God by those who knew him best, what does that mean to you and me? I always like to ask myself as I am preparing a sermon, "What difference does this scripture make to the folks listening out there?" This week, the Gospel reading confronts us with

- the scandal of the Incarnation,
- the scandal of God becoming a human,
- the scandal of God living with us,
- the scandal of God living as one of us.

St. Athanasius wrote eloquently about the Incarnation. In the 4th century, Athanasius stood up against the world to defend the Christian faith in a Trinitarian God. Perhaps his greatest work was titled *On the Incarnation*. In it, Athanasius explained how it was that God came to live among us. Athanasius wrote, "It was our sorry case that caused the Word to come down, our transgression that called out his love for us, so that he made haste to help us and to appear among us. It was we who were the cause of his taking human form, and for our salvation that in his great love he was both born and manifested in human body."

Fortunately, we have the gift of hindsight – something the people of Nazareth did not yet have. We can look back on all that Jesus did in his own lifetime. We can read Jesus'

teachings and study his miracles. Then we can look to all that his followers did after his death and resurrection. Just a dozen guys from Galilee turned the whole Roman world upside down. Now, 2,000 years later, not a person on the planet who thinks of the village of Nazareth does so without thinking of the name of Jesus. Jesus' story is the ultimate story of a "small town boy who done good." We can see the great miracles that occurred in Jesus' lifetime, in the lives of his followers and in our own lives today. We can see the power of God transforming lives here on the New Hampshire Seacoast in the name of Jesus Christ. So, we can be more certain of Jesus' divinity than the people of Nazareth were. We *know* Jesus to be the Son of God.

The point is this. It was, to use a phrase I grew up with in rural Delaware, as a "plain old Joe" that Jesus experienced life in Nazareth, with all its joys and sorrows, just like everybody else. And that is the Good News from this morning's Gospel. Jesus, the Son of God, knows our joys and our sorrows better than a distant God ever could. Because, as I said a couple of weeks ago, we do not worship a distant God. We do not worship a God who can't understand us.

- We worship a God who has lived among us.
- We worship a God who knows our joys.
- We worship a God who knows our pain.
- We worship a living God who has lived among us.

No matter how broken your life has become, no matter what pain or grief you have to bear, Jesus understands. That's the Good News for *us* in this story. On the cross, Jesus experienced all the pain of the world and loved us all anyway. Not because he *couldn't* understand us, but because he *did*.

Jesus is still present to us in a form that seems all too common. In just a few minutes, we will come forward to partake of bread and wine. These products of human hands are just the common stuff of life, yet God still comes to us in and through them. Jesus is present in the bread and wine and we partake of that very real presence in communion. Jesus still encounters us in a very real way. Then as we go out from this service, we remember how the Jesus we encounter in the bread and wine wants to go with us through all our week, to experience our joys and sorrows with us. And so he does. And so he does.