

BIBLICAL RESOURCES



Ezekiel 2:2-5; Psalm 123 (122); 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Mark 6:1-6a

On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded

Mark 6:1 Jesus left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. 2 On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! 3 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?" And they took offence at him. 4 Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." 5 And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. 6 And he was amazed at their unbelief.



Reconstructed synagogue at Nazareth

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This remarkable story is told in Matthew 13:54-58, Luke 4:16-30 and here in Mark 6:1-6. The event is surely historical. The longer version in Luke is his own creation. Out of the material in Mark 6:1-6, Luke created a significant *tableau* which uses the story to present themes he wished to anticipate in this scene and emphasise in his Gospel as a whole. For example, the portrayal of Jesus as prophet (and martyr) is very important in the third Gospel. This

prophetic characterisation is already present in Mark and emphasised by the proverb quoted by Jesus about a prophet.

KIND OF WRITING

This is a vignette—a short story or *chreia*—which captures some aspect of Jesus' teaching and ministry. In this case, it has a kind of summarising effect because this scene closes a major section of Mark's Gospel from 3:7-6:6a. The questions asked by the towns-people summarise the previous chapters. The "wisdom" given to him is a reference to the parables in Mark 4 and the "deeds of power" serve to remind us of the preceding three miracles: the calming of the storm, the Gerasene demoniac, the woman with the flow of blood and the twelve-year old who had died. An important dynamic in Mark is that Jesus is misunderstood not only by identifiable opponents, such as the Pharisees, but even by those closest to him, including his neighbours and family. This misunderstanding / rejection anticipates the misunderstanding of those closest to him in the ministry and their eventual betrayal.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Broadly speaking, the authentic prophets of the Old Testament were not acceptable to the people because they challenged the conventional wisdom and the "usual" way of seeing things. Sometimes the prophets were not only rejected but also persecuted and even put to death.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And he replied,

Thought for the day

Familiarity breeds...well, sometimes blindness. We do need familiarity—we couldn't be working things out for the first time all of the time. What is regular and known can help us get on with the day or the job or the relationship. But there are times—we all have them—when sheer familiarity impedes our understanding and prevents our encounter with the new, the different and the radical.

Our case is, perhaps, the diametric opposite of that of the people of Nazareth. Our too comfortable faith familiarity with Jesus can hinder us from seeing the radical, the new, the disturbing. Sometimes a bit of defamiliarisation would be good for us!!

Prayer

Lord, take away dull familiarity and shake us up that we may ask ourselves honestly, "Who then is this?" Amen.

"Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:31-35)

There are echoes of the present story dispersed in the Fourth Gospel:

The Jews were astonished at it, saying, "How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?" (John 7:15) They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" (John 6:42) For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honour in the prophet's own country. (John 4:44) Then they tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands. (John 10:39)

ST PAUL

In his own ministry, Paul too was limited by the receptivity of his hearers. One example may suffice:

"And so, brothers and sisters, I could not

speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not merely human?” (1 Corinthians 3:1-4)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

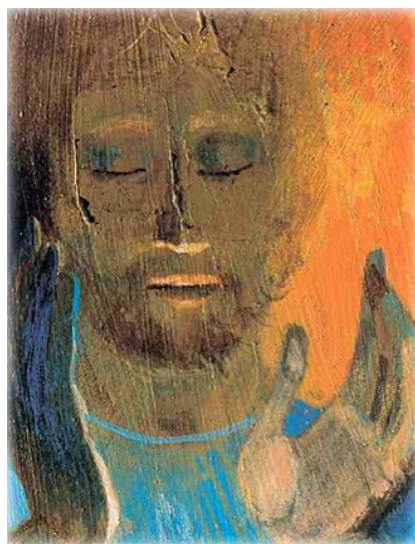
Verse 1 The only other mention, in Mark, of Jesus’ hometown is in 1:9. The disciples here are portrayed as “following him” in contrast to the unbelief encountered.

Verse 2 A synagogue was a meeting house for general business of the community, for teaching and also for prayer. Synagogues from the period survive in the Holy Land and elsewhere. Astounded is a common reaction to Jesus in this Gospel (Mark 1:22; 6:2; 7:37; 10:26; 11:18). It might seem positive, but in reality it expresses a rather static reaction to Jesus which “goes nowhere”. The reaction of the townspeople reflects the common reaction when someone from humble origins comes to prominence, that is small-mindedness. As noted above, the mention of his wisdom takes us back to the parables and the deeds of power remind us of the immediately preceding miracles. Notice that they ask three questions: once “whence” and twice “what”. The initial wonder soon degenerates into a negative reaction as they recall their supposed familiarity with this Jesus.

Verse 3 The word traditionally translated as carpenter is rather more general and refers to someone who could work in metal, wood or stone (“builder’s labourer”). The three questions are matched by three notes of familiarity: his mother, his brothers and his sisters. Is not this the carpenter? No other gospel calls Jesus a carpenter. Some witnesses have “the carpenter’s son,” as in Mt 13:55. Son of Mary: contrary to Jewish custom, which calls a man the son of his father, this expression may reflect Mark’s own faith that God is the Father of Jesus (Mk 1:1, 11; 8:38; 13:32; 14:36). The brother of James . . . Simon: in Semitic usage, the terms “brother,” “sister” are applied not only to children of the same parents, but to nephews, nieces, cousins, half-brothers, and half-sisters; cf Gn 14:16; 29:15; Lv 10:4. While one cannot

suppose that the meaning of a Greek word should be sought in the first place from Semitic usage, the Septuagint often translates the Hebrew “family member” by the Greek word *adelphos*, “brother,” as in the cited passages, a fact that may argue for a similar breadth of meaning in some New Testament passages. For instance, there is no doubt that in v. 17, “brother” is used of Philip, who was actually the half-brother of Herod Antipas. On the other hand, Mark may have understood the terms literally; see also Mt 3:31-32; 12:46; 13:55-56; Lk 8:19; Jn 7:3, 5. The question of meaning here would not have arisen but for the faith of the church in Mary’s perpetual virginity. Although Mark does not teach (or deny) the virginal conception, the mention in such detail of brothers and sisters could well have been a bit of a challenge even when he was writing, as it is today. Commentators conclude that the story is historical, on the criterion of embarrassment. The word translated (correctly) as “took offence” is “they were scandalised”. To scandalise occurs a few times in this Gospel (Mark 4:17; 6:3; 9:42-47; 14:27, 29). The literal meaning is to cause to stumble but it soon takes on a figurative sense of offence, as here.

Verse 4 A prophet is not without honour except . . . in his own house: a saying that finds parallels in other literatures, especially Jewish and Greek, but without reference to a prophet. Comparing himself to previous Hebrew prophets whom the people rejected, Jesus intimates his own eventual rejection by the nation especially in view of the dishonour his own relatives had shown him (Mk 3:21) and now his townspeople as well. Notice that Jesus too uses a three-fold formula in his reply. Sheer familiarity leads to inability to accept from this person whom we think we already know.



Verse 5 The idea that Jesus could do no deed of power is also likely to be historical. The later tradition, under the influence of the Easter faith, did not attribute incapacity to Jesus, even before the resurrection. The little correction is also interesting – he did actually heal a few people, in this case the sick, perhaps representing those who know their need of God.

Verse 6 This is a very strong verse, underlining their lack of faith. Lack of faith is itself a theme in Mark (5:34, 36).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The story reminds us of how personal prejudices and agendas can block us from listening to the content of what another person has to say, no matter how relevant or wise it is. Perhaps you have experienced this? What difference has it made to you when you were able to focus on the content of what was being said and leave to one side your own prejudices about the speaker?

2. It has been said that there is nothing as useless as the right advice at the wrong time. We may want to reach out to another, but may be unable to make a useful contribution because at that moment the other person is not ready to be helped. Like Jesus we can “do no deed of power”. As Jesus had to be patient and wait for another opportunity so do we. What have you learned about the importance of patience in working with other people?

3. The topic of religion can easily bring up prejudices, leading some to dismiss religion as superstition, old hat, or based on an outdated world view. Even among believers, prejudice can make it hard for individuals to listen to an alternative way of looking at things, to consider a different way of celebrating liturgy, or to live at peace with difference. Yet a closed mind can lead to a stagnant faith. When have you found that a willingness to consider a different perspective led to a deepening and strengthening of your faith?

PRAYER

God of the prophets, in every age you send the word of truth, familiar yet new, a sign of contradiction.

Let us not be counted among those who lack faith, but give us the vision to see Christ in our midst and to welcome your saving word. We make this prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness

2 Cor 12:1 *It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.* 2 *I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows.* 3 *And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—* 4 *was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.* 5 *On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.* 6 *But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me,* 7 *even considering the exceptional character of the revelations.*

Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. 8 Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, 9 but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Here we have perhaps the most remembered passage from 2 Corinthians. Out of context, as in the lectionary, it is hard to make sense of it. Why should Paul be kept from being too elated? This time, it is absolutely necessary to read the preceding verses (given above in italics). Thus we comment all the verses above.

KIND OF WRITING

Here Paul is ironic, brilliant, detached, witty and utterly in earnest. Technically, a vision report, cast in the language of Jewish apocalyptic. The “Fool’s Speech” is also a fine example of the often mentioned *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the combination of awe and attraction, marking the reports of significance religious experience. It is notable that Paul gives the Corinthians what they want—flashy spirituality—while at the same time undermining their desire for such phenomena. And yet, the report is utterly authentic and deeply personal. The

many layers in this subtle communication show that Paul was not quite in earnest when he said *I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom.* (1 Cor 2:1) See 1 Cor 14:15-19 below.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The context in the community is the Corinthians, over-attached to the flashy gifts and certainly inclined to over-estimate the significance of the gifts.

RELATED PASSAGES

What should I do then? I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also. Otherwise, if you say a blessing with the spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say the “Amen” to your thanksgiving, since the outsider does not know what you are saying? For you may give thanks well enough, but the other person is not built up. I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you; nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue. (1 Cor 14:15-19)

For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor 1:25)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The tone is double-edged: if this is what you want...but I don’t think it matters!

Verse 2 Just to be clear, Paul means himself. It is not his conversation experience (around 34-37 AD) but a later one (around 42 AD). Paul protects the mystery by using apocalyptic imagery: caught up, third heaven, God know.

Verses 3-4 Repeated for even greater emphasis. “Things not to be told” is powerful in Greek: *arrēta rhēmata*, lit. unutterable words. Thus, Paul puts a stop to the spiritual voyeurism of the Corinthians. Even if such things *could* be repeated, it is simply not *permitted*.

Verse 5 The detachment from this “other person” is pointedly tongue-in-cheek. Paul illustrates a detachment he wishes the Corinthians might have!

Verses 6-7a Contrast: *I have been a fool! You forced me to it.* (2 Cor 12:11). In reality, the Corinthians are not at all tempted to think better of Paul than what is seen in him!!

Verse 7b No one knows what this “thorn” was, except that it was some kind of debilitating episode which could incapacitate and humiliate the apostle at any time. Speculation ranges widely: epilepsy, hysteria, depression, headaches, or eye problems—even leprosy and malaria have had their advocates, as have stuttering, spiritual temptations. It is unlikely to be anything physical because Paul is very robust: (Rom 8:35-39; 1 Cor 4:11-12; 2 Cor 1:8-10; 4:7-10; 6:4-10; 11:21b-29). We do know that the Corinthians are expected to recognise it without further specification. It may be that J. Murphy-O’Connor was right and that it had to do with the ministry and Paul’s weak oratorical presence (in contrast to his “strong letters”).

Verse 8-9 The prayer is intense and earnest. The response is meant not only for Paul, but also for the Corinthians. Cf. 1 Cor 1:25 and its context. Grace—*charis*—means not only support and help but really the presence of Jesus. The paradox is rooted in the central paradox of God’s wisdom and power disclosed in the foolishness and weakness of the cross. Far from being ashamed of weakness, weakness is the very channel, the royal road by which God’s grace comes.

Verse 10 Again, tremendously ironic. The Corinthians must know how much Paul had actually been able to put up with (see under 7b above). It is evident that he is actually *both* weak and strong.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Has it ever been for me that what seemed dreadful at the time became in retrospect a means of grace?
2. When I pray insistently, do I “hear” a word from the Lord which guides me?

PRAYER

You are the potter, we are the clay, the earthen vessels in which your treasure is carried. We pray that inadequate as we are—cracked betimes—we may offer to all we meet a word of life, a glimpse of the Gospel, a seed of hope. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Whether they hear or refuse to hear, they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.

Ezek 2:2 And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me. 3 He said to me, Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. 4 The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, “Thus says the Lord GOD.” 5 Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them. 6 *And you, O mortal, do not be afraid of them, and do not be afraid of their words, though briars and thorns surround you and you live among scorpions; do not be afraid of their words, and do not be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house.* 7 *You shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear; for they are a rebellious house.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our OT reading (including vv. 6-7) portrays the call of the prophet Ezekiel. The basis for a prophetic vocation is twofold: the divine initiative and the gift of the prophetic spirit. Only then can a mortal dare to say “Thus says the Lord God.” The reading offers at the same time a picture of the hearers, in strikingly disparaging vocabulary. Notice the nouns (a nation of rebels), the verbs (rebelled, transgressed, refuse) and the adjectives (impudent, stubborn, rebellious). All in all, prophets have a difficult task!

KIND OF WRITING

The call of Ezekiel is very elaborately presented. In 1:28-3:15, we find a combination of the experiential and the physical (1:28-2:2; 2:8-3:3; 3:12-15) with the verbal and aural (2:3-7; 3:4-11). The physical is quite striking: collapsing, eating a scroll and being lifted up. Our excerpt (verbal and aural) is best understood within that wider presentation of vocation.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The concerns of Ezekiel are the exile, the destruction of Jerusalem, the responsibility of the people and need for a change of heart so that the people may come back to YHWH, in a renewed

covenant loyalty. God’s transcendence is expressed in the book using very vivid apocalyptic language. Layout:

The prophet’s commissioning and preparation (1–7)

First vision (1:1–28) Commissioning (2:1–3:21) Symbolic acts disclosing fate of Jerusalem (3:22–5:4) Oracles disclosing divine judgment (5: 5–7: 27) The Prophet’s activity among the exiles (8–39)

Second Vision: Temple abominations (8–11) Oracles against leaders in Jerusalem (12–15) Disclosure of the abominations (16–23) Yahweh’s war against nations of rebels (24–33) Siege of Jerusalem begun (24) Oracles against foreign nations (25–32) Siege of Jerusalem concluded (33) Yahweh’s campaign to restore Israel (34–39) The New Kingdom (40–48)

Third Vision on Mountains of Israel (40–43) Law of the Temple (44–46) Tribal Boundaries; Regeneration of the Land (47–48)

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The spirit is intimately linked to the prophet’s call and work: *The spirit entered the prophet:* Ezek 2:2; 3:24. *The spirit lifted the prophet:* Ezek 3:12, 14; 8:3; 11:1, 24; 43:5. *The spirit of the Lord fell upon him:* Ezek 11:5

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 2 The “he” is God: *This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of someone speaking. He said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you.* (Ezekiel 1:28–2:2) The prophet has collapsed before the mystery and been made to eat a scroll. Now the spirit enters him (see the references above). The spirit of the Lord is associated with prophecy in 1Sam 10:6, 10; 1 Kings 18:12; 22:21-23.

Verse 3 Mortal = “Son of Man” = *ben ’adham* = son of Adam, lit. son of man. This has a high value for Christians, largely in the light of Dan 7:13. In Ezekiel, however, the contrast is between royalty and ordinary people (of the land). Thus, it conveys the idea of ser-

vice—in the case of Ezekiel, to YHWH. The NRSV translation (used here) of Son of Man as “mortal” misses the point for the sake of inclusive language. The expression is found widely throughout Ezekiel, as an exhaustive (and exhausting) inventory indicates. Ezek 2:1, 3, 6, 8; 3:1, 3–4, 10, 17, 25; 4:1, etc. for 95 occurrences! Notice as well: the Israelites are identified in entirely negative categories, reflecting the blame for the collapse of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem. Finally, the translation should read: “to those nations of rebels” because in Hebrew, “nations” is plural, possibly referring to the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin. For a fuller version of rebellion, read Ezek 16.

Verse 4 “Thus says the Lord God” is a characteristic expression of Ezekiel. It derives from the sending of messengers on diplomatic and business missions (e.g. Gen 32:5).

Verse 5 A positive reaction is expected but which or whether, a prophet has been sent and God’s word delivered. “Rebellious” is an insistent theme in Ezekiel occurring some sixteen times (Ezek 2:5–8; 3:9, 26–27; 12:2–3, 9, 25; 17:12; 24:3; 44:6). Cf. When this comes—and come it will!—then they shall know that a prophet has been among them. (Ezekiel 33:33)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The text underlines the divine inspiration of prophet and invites contemporary reflection on who are the prophets today and where to I find God’s word in our world? A prayer of thanksgiving that there are such people.

2. The emphasis on rebellion etc. invites reflection on our own resistance to God’s word. What has been my experience when I closed my heart to God and to the Gospel?

3. The message of Ezekiel leads inexorably to a change of heart, to a new spirit within us. When have I felt myself drawn inwards on my own spiritual journey? How have I nurtured that gift of God? How do I see my own conversion into the future?

PRAYER

God of all, we are hearers of the word, and our hearts are restless until they come to rest in you. Attune our inner selves to your presence in our world and to your word within, that we may return to you with all our hearts.

THE LITURGY

Ezekiel 2:2-5; Psalm 123 (122); 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Mark 6:1-6a

READINGS 1 AND 3

The reading from Ezekiel anticipates the Gospel in two ways. First of all, Jesus is presented as a prophet, just like the prophets from of old. We know of course that Jesus was much more than a prophet, but that role was foundational for the self-understanding of the historical Jesus. Secondly, prophets encounter resistance: this was true of Ezekiel and was also true of Jesus.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

For a change, the Psalm does not fit as closely as usual to the reading. However, it does express the longing for a “word” from God and goes on to confess resistance to God. Prophets always had to struggle against opposition to their teaching.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Ezekiel 2:2-5

People who remind us of awkward truths or realities are often unwelcome. This is true today and we can all think of examples in the current climate. It was true in the past as well: true for Jesus in his day and true for Ezekiel as well.

Second reading

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

It is encouraging to hear that even a great believer like Paul has to struggle with personal challenges. He mentions today the “thorn in the flesh”. No one really knows what this was. For us today, the important thing is to learn from how he dealt with it.

Gospel

Mark 6:1-6a

This is a remarkable story, which gives rise to many questions! It has, however, the ring of truth to it. It is often the case that our familiarity blinds us to the gifts and charisms of others.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 4 July

St Augustine Zhao Rong and companions, martyrs

Hosea 2:16, 17-18, 21-22

Until Thursday, we read from the prophet Hosea, known for his use of marriage as a symbol of God’s love for his people. This emerges rather touchingly in today’s reading.

Matthew 9:18-26

This is Matthew’s brisk telling of a story familiar from Mark. The “sandwich” technique here creates suspense: he can heal the sick, but can he raise the dead?

Tuesday 10 July

Hos 8:4-7, 11-13

The worship of idols was a constant threat in the ancient world. Idols were more tangible and visible. In case we dismiss the risk too readily, it may help to remember the words of our Lord: For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:21)

Matthew 9:32-37

A sinister note is registered in the first paragraph of this reading. After that, Jesus the healer brings people God’s compassion.

Wednesday 11 July

St Benedict, abbot

Proverbs 2:1-9

For the feast, we interrupt the readings from Hosea and read from Proverbs. Where can we find wisdom, truth, virtue, justice, understanding and fear of the Lord? According to Proverbs—and later according to St Benedict and many other holy men and women—these things are to be found by taking the Word of the Lord to heart.

Matthew 19:27-29

The Gospel—chosen for the feast—is really about those who have followed Jesus in leaving behind all “sensible”, “normal” forms of security and happiness for the sake of the Good News.

Thursday 12 July

Hosea 11:1-4, 8-9

We may think that God as father is found only in the New Testament, but not so! Speaking from God’s point of view, Hosea portrays God as a loving, anxious, deeply attached parent.

Matthew 10:7-15

The mission instruction is challenging: travel light, bear witness welcome or not. Move on!

Friday 13 July

St Henry, Holy Roman Emperor

Hosea 14:2-10

This is a great invitation to conversion of heart. The first part is the call to come back to the Lord. The second part spell out the super-generous response of God to our response to him.

Matthew 10:16-23

Jesus was not naïve. Sending out the Twelve was sending them into danger. Probably we over hear some of the experiences of the later church in the details, as there is no evidence that these things took place during the ministry of Jesus.

Saturday 14 July

St Camillus de Lellis

Isaiah 6:1-8

Beginning today, we have a week of readings from Isaiah. To start, the lectionary offers us the foundational vision of the prophet, a fabulous vision of the holiness of God, both awesome and alluring. You may recognise words we say at every Mass.

Matthew 10:24-33

Under the general heading of the mission discourse, disparate sayings are offered, reflecting a variety of concerns. Sometimes, the word is threatening; other times, it is consoling. A sense of anxious urgency hangs over the whole teaching.