

Sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney 6th September, 2015.
Lectionary Readings: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37.

Detours on the Way to Faith

“Jesus left the region around Tyre and went by way of Sidon toward Lake Galilee. He went through the land near the ten cities known as Decapolis.” A detour? Or a pilgrimage?

Ask a local for directions, and you get some puzzling answers. One Irish answer was: “You can't get there from here!” Do we not all make strange detours, journeys among strangers, find faith and healing along the way? The word of life is our unknown and unseen companion in our detours and awakens us to the realities of our life and circumstances. We hear and we learn to speak.

Today's gospel is about strange detours, and wacky geography. Did Mark know his geography? It's a round-about route. Also, things happen among foreigners who are called “dogs.”

Perhaps Mark is using geography to make a theological point. God's grace crops up in unexpected places amongst despised people. People who don't follow the correct rules, dress and speak differently, eat the wrong foods and want to have what belongs to us rather than them.

Mark is following a pattern found also in the detours of the Hebrews, the wandering Jews, the nomads of the Old Testament, who never seem to go from one place to another by a direct route.

How far do we have to go back to find original stories of “Detours on the Way to Faith?” To the beginning of history? Adam and Eve got detoured from the garden of paradise where all was provided to the fertile crescent to labour by the sweat of their brow for a living?

Or to Abraham, detouring from Ur of Chaldea to Haran in what is now Turkey and then by way of Egypt to the so-called promised land? The archetypal wandering Jew. Perhaps he set out in desperation to find a new life, but looking back he recast his story to say he set out in faith.

We could say he found his faith at the end of the detour or on the way to the end. He encountered the high priest named Melchizedek in the place later named Jerusalem or Zion. There he detoured to worship the one God. No direct route, but a detour as a stranger among strangers.

Or do we think of the Exodus story? It should have simple enough to exit Egypt and head straight into the promised land. A really short trip in distance and time. But no, they have to wander about for years in the desert undergoing all kinds of trials and tribulations. Detour or pilgrimage?

And sharing weird experiences too: water pouring out of rock, food falling from heaven (manna or bread of heaven?) Meat flying through the air in the form of birds, walls of cities crumbling at the blast of a trumpet. Encountering golden calves and snakes.

Or do we think of your life and mine? We too have Spirit baptisms: the water of life, the sharing of the bread of life, the breaking down of barriers and the movement forward amongst the different values and characters we encounter on our detours. Detours become pilgrimages.

Or do we think of Exodus as communal baptism – through the Sea of Reeds or Red Sea, at the start and then at the end to crossing the Jordan River at the end of the detour, the round-about journey.

Today we have reminders of baptism with the coming for confirmation of three young baptised people to experience their first communion. No doubt feeling like strangers in a foreign land. But we make Isabel, Christopher and Benjamin welcome. We congratulate them on their detour to this time, place and community. They help us recall our own baptisms and first communions.

For them it has been a life of detours through all kinds of experiences and the gathering of new understandings. There have been healing events along the way: new life, gifts of hearing and speaking, growth into a new person or a new stage of being. Pilgrimage.

Baptism is about going through the waters of life and being resurrected on the other side.

In communion we celebrate death and resurrection. We take the brokenness of life into ourselves as we eat the broken bread. We take the poured-outness of life, the expenditure of our energy and passion as we drink the communion wine. We welcome both brokenness and expenditure.

For us, communion reminds of the self-giving of Jesus in taking up the cross and emerging from the tomb to new life. The eating of the brokenness of our lives and the drinking of the poured-outness is a grasping of the fact that life is a gift and not a problem. Life is pilgrimage.

What was Jesus doing with his detours through strange places, situations and people but expending his life, finding his pilgrimage and making a difference wherever he went. He went as a stranger and encountered strangers. Some were healed, some gained the ability to hear the Word of life and to speak the word of life, as we heard in our gospel reading.

Some of the differences he didn't expect or perhaps want, but he found fertile ground in strange places that no self-respecting Jew would have wanted to venture into.

In your detours and mine I'm sure that we have found the same kinds of experience of sustenance in strange places and among strange people.

The poor Greek woman encountered Jesus and made him detour to do some healing, and allow a Gentile dog to gather up the scraps of bread. She was a smart and persistent outsider who showed she could make a difference too. The man who couldn't hear or speak found his ears and speech.

The story of Jesus' detour throws light on what it is like to follow Jesus. You get detoured! The disciples went to places they would not have chosen, to people they would have avoided, to situations that were low on the priority-list of the ordinary, Torah-respecting Jew.

A funny thing happened to Jesus on his way to heal Israel. He showed his message and compassion could be pushed to their geographic and ethnic limits.

When you follow Jesus, surprises, unexpected circumstances and strangers are the norm. Detours are to be expected, caused by the unpredictable geography of God's grace.

How did I get here? Ask yourself that question, as you share this worship, this confirmation, this communion, this celebration of life. How did it happen? Was it planned? Is it what you expected?

Was it God who brought about all the detours? Who made refreshing water appear, bread fall from heaven, walls tumble down, create new possibilities? Who made the detour a pilgrim's journey?

Some of us, looking back say: "It's amazing how well it's all turned out. I've had some really beautiful experiences in the midst of a totally barren land. I've been to places, met people and done things that were not in the original manual for life I believed I had been given."

The poet W H Auden, quoted by Irvin D. Yalom in *Existential Psychotherapy* said: "When I look back at the three or four choices in my life which have been decisive, I find that, at the time I made them, I had very little sense of the seriousness of what I was doing and only later did I discover what had seemed an unimportant brook was, in fact a Rubicon."

Strange things happen when we are side-tracked, made to detour. Each of us can say that "My life is a composite of the experiences I have had, people I have met, the detours God has led me upon."

As Tennyson wrote of Ulysses:

"I am part of all that I have met; Yet all experience is an arch where through
Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades For ever and for ever when I move."

Happy detouring with "A man there lived in Galilee like no one else before!"