

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

SANDAL SCANDALS

Mark 6:1-13

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 9)

Analysis by Jerome Burce

1 He left that place and came to his home town, 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 offense at him. 4 Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honor, except in their home town, 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.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. 7 He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. 8 He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; 9 but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. 10 He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. 11 If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.' 12 So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. 13 They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick

and cured them.

Notes on the text:

1. "They took offense," v. 3b, could be rendered "they were scandalized." This passes along not only the sense of the Greek but the sound of it too
2. The last three words of v. 11, Greek text, are "eis martyrion autois." KJV and its progeny—RSV, NRSV, NKJV, most recently ESV—renders "for/as testimony against them." Thus NIV as well. An alternative approach is taken by NEB ("as a warning to them") and JB ("as a sign to them"), the latter coming closest to a straightforward turning of the words, unencumbered by echoes of the Matthean parallel (Mt. 10:14-15) or by other preconceptions, wherever obtained, as to what the dust-shaking signifies.

DIAGNOSIS: Offense Taken

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Kicking Up a Fuss*

"Notice," says a colleague, "how in Mark's account of the apostolic sending the missionaries are explicitly told to wear sandals (v. 9) whereas in Matthew's version they're explicitly told not to (Mt. 10:10)." Fair enough, let's notice. Better still, without pretending to resolve or explain the contradiction, let's put Mark's detail to work. Sandals, strapped on, shoe evangelists. Taken off and shaken, they help send a message to ingrates (v. 11). Either function will cause Jesus' kinfolk to fuss these days. Sandals on? In the mainline gatherings of the home-town crowd evangelism is in disrepute ("how dare we say that our God- news is better than theirs?") Sandals off? Evangelicals, ever quick to hit the bricks for Jesus, will deplore the thought of leaving the stubborn to stew

("how dare we move on when there's saving to be done?"). There's more. Almost all American branches of the Jesus' clan think highly of being nice. ("How else will we attract more members?" etc.) The sandals-off routine, whatever it means, does not encompass nice. The upshot? When Jesus repeats this instruction through his preachers this Sunday eyebrows will arch. Worse, hearts will harden.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *The Home Town Bristle*

After all, as in Galilee so also in America: familiarity with Jesus has bred presumption. He is what we think him to be, what we have chosen over the years to let him be. "Carpenter"? Mary's boy? That was then (v. 3). Now it's friend; teacher; model human being; the man upstairs. Or that perennial favorite, Personal Savior, the emphasis of course on personal, just me and my Jesus (my opting, of course, not meant to limit or disrespect your opting). Perspectives on Jesus are matters of corporate culture as well. Every congregation has its preferred take. So does every church body and every church-related institution. What happens when words and deeds of his don't comport with our fixed images of him? As then, so now: we shrug them off. Beneath the tunics (v. 9) of our gauzy pieties we also bristle, the raised neck hair signaling the dearth of honor that the Prophet capital P is getting in the "home town" (v. 4) of assemblies stamped with his name, their denizens doused with his baptism.. "Sandals on!" he orders, or at some point "Sandals off!" The response he keeps getting? "Forget it, pal. Who died and made you God?" (v. 3b; 14:64). Now that's "unbelief" (v. 6). Amazing, isn't it?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Dust Maker*

Notice the bind we're in, how it's impossible to avoid strapping on those sandals as message-bearers or whipping them off as signal-senders. If we won't tell others "that all should repent" (v. 12) then we send a word to God about the value of

repentance. If we refuse to dust off feet in the ingrate's direction then the dust gets shaken in Jesus' face (see above). Deadly moves, these. For one thing, they countermand God's thrust in Jesus to assert his "authority over the unclean spirits" (v. 7), our arrogant airs included. For another they sever our ties to Jesus as kindred doers of the will of God (4:35). For yet another they provoke Jesus' consternation (v. 6); still worse, they portend his disdain (8:38). All these things, taken together, suck the oomph from the one "deed of power" (v. 5) that every descendent of Adam needs an extraordinary relative to accomplish on his or her behalf. There is, recall, "a testimony against them" (v. 11) already hanging in the air, a cloud of dust, perpetual and poisonous, that God stirred up on the day he took offense and shook his sandals at the first faithless sinner (Gen. 3:19). If mighty brother Jesus won't save me from this, who will? If I brush this brother off, what am I except the very dust that's falling from my feet?

PROGNOSIS: Offense Given

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Dust Buster*
"Eloi lema sabachthani?" On a dust-covered hill outside Jerusalem Jesus shrieks his agony into the darkness (15:34), acknowledging thereby that God has removed his sandals all over again and is shaking them at him. This is the appalling mercy of God, that he attends to offenses taken, his at us, ours at him, by whipping up a greater offense by far. To put it precisely, he holds the Son accountable for all that is wrong, an "all" that embraces also the unbelief of Jesus' relatives and the failure of his missionaries, both items so recently punctuated by the crowing of a cock (14:68c, 72). Hence the scandal to beat all scandals: God aligned with Caiaphas and Pilate, with soldiers, crowd and criminals—God with us, to be frank, consigning Christ to dust. The stage is set. Now comes the ultimate deed of power, a deed shrouded in a semblance of powerlessness for the simple

reason that the deed itself is an almighty refusal to exercise power. He does not, for example, “come down from the cross” so that braying kinfolk “may see and believe” (15:32) as he dusts off his feet in the direction of the sky. Instead he hangs there and dies, a cosmic Dust Buster, so to speak—all offense absorbed (God’s with us, ours with God) and none spewed back. The one man’s righteous act, Paul calls it (Rom. 5:18). That this settles the dust where God is concerned gets signaled on the third day when New Adam bursts from the tomb with the promise of life for all.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *The Home Town Buzz*

That bursting from the tomb unleashes a new offense, quarterbacked by Christ. Mark’s longer ending makes this plain (16:9-20). The offense gets launched by Jesus’ return to disciples “sitting at the table” (16:14)—his home town, these Easter days. The return includes blunt words—not nice; also necessary—about “lack of faith and stubbornness” (16:14). Implied if not mentioned by Mark is the display of holes in hands, feet, and side, that offering of a new perspective and the only one that matters on who Jesus is and what he’s finally about. “Sandals on,” says he when he’s all done, and with that away they scurry (16:15, 20), propelled by the honor in which they now hold him. Every Sunday reprises Easter. At its heart is this setting forth of Jesus in Easter perspective, Good Friday’s wounds accentuated. The aim is that all present “should repent” and be released from the “many demons” of their bristling and their preferring (v. 12), their unbelief replaced by the Church’s happy shout: “Christ has died; Christ has risen; Christ will come again.” Do such deeds of power actually take place among us? Can the kinfolk in their persons and assemblages be sucked, blown, or wafted into joyful, honest faith? Of course they can. Listen to the buzz sometime when Christ is rightly

preached.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Kicking Up Some Dust*

Or even better, watch them go on the offensive—some, a few, the ones with whom the Gospel has hit home. Week after week they trickle into the world from their several ecclesiastical camps, sandals in place, animated by the conviction that the God-news they've finally stumbled into in Christ is indeed the better God-news: better for being truer, more liberating, more redolent of life, and all of this by far, no other version coming close. "Better," of course, is a fighting word where regnant spirits are concerned. As ever, they take offense. The sandaled missionaries, unimpressed, simply go ahead and give it, thereby exercising their "authority over the unclean spirits" (v. 7), their backbones stiffened by Jesus' Holy Spirit. "How," they say, "do we withhold news this good from friend and neighbor, to say nothing of the dying stranger?" Infected with an urgency to tell, they also stay on the move. If one will not hear, perhaps another will; though in leaving the one they have the kindness—not nice-ness, kindness—to whip those sandals off. In offended spite? Not at all. Rather, to leave a reminder, "a sign to them" (v. 11, JB), of the dust we are by God's decree. Might this incite a better hearing the next time a Dust-Buster's rep stops in for a visit? Christ only knows. The missionaries don't. It suffices for them to trust him. Sandals on or sandals off, they trust him.