

Today's gospel shows Jesus as the one fulfilling what was said to the prophet Ezekiel about the Son of Man (a messianic term) being sent to the rebellious and obstinate Israelites. What is most surprising—even to Jesus—is that he encountered the most resistance in his own hometown. Jesus was amazed at his neighbors' and friends' lack of faith. So little was their faith that he could not work any mighty deeds among them. There are two lessons we can take away from the rejection of Jesus in Nazareth.

First there is a problem. If Jesus is God—which he is—how can there be a limit to his power? In the Superman comics, kryptonite—rocks from Superman's home planet of Krypton—could limit Superman's power and even kill him if he was exposed to it for too long. Was there something like “Nazorite” which did the same thing to Jesus? It isn't that Jesus' power is limited; the problem is that people are hindered from **experiencing** his power by their refusal to believe in him. Strictly speaking, faith in Jesus is required in order for him to work in our lives; he doesn't force his way in. Speaking more broadly, why don't we experience his power even when he is at work in our lives? Maybe because he doesn't answer our prayers in the ways we want him to.

What about miracles? God works miracles all the time, but we fail to experience them because they are not the miracles we are looking for. For example: in the tv series Downton Abbey one of the main characters, Captain Matthew Crawley, the heir of the estate, was seriously injured by a shell during World War I. He was brought to the village hospital where one of his cousins, Lady Sybil, who was serving as a nurse, tried to clean him by removing his bloody uniform. A small stuffed animal fell out of his clothes. Sybil recognized it as belonging to her older sister Mary, who was also there. Sybil picked up the toy and asked “What is this doing here?” Lady Mary replied, “I gave it to him for good luck before he left for the war.” Sybil said, “Obviously, it didn't work.” To which Mary correctly replied, “He's alive isn't he?” The miracle Sybil wanted was for Matthew to escape the war unharmed. Mary recognized that even though he was seriously injured, he was still alive and where there is life, there is hope. How often do we fail to experience Jesus' mighty works because he doesn't work the way we want him to?

Jesus couldn't work miracles because the people didn't have faith in him. Why did they reject him? Because they thought they knew him. They knew his family. By the way, those brothers and sisters were probably cousins or other close relatives; the church has always taught that Mary gave birth only to Jesus. All they could see was the man who grew up in their village who seemed so

ordinary and was so much like themselves, just a simple small town carpenter from a poor family—how could he be a prophet or even the messiah? What were they doing to Jesus? They were putting him in a box.

Our brains like to classify and categorize things; we like to file things away in little boxes that we create. That makes it easier for us to process all of the data coming in from our senses. The problem is that simple categories don't allow us to fully experience or deal with things and people who are so much more complex than what they appear to be. When we categorize people, we are dealing in stereotypes. Stereotypes can be very harmful—for instance when we stereotype people based on their race or culture or gender or age. Or they can just be annoying. One of the best responses I ever heard from a person being stereotyped came from Dolly Parton. She said that people used to think she was just a dumb blonde hillbilly. The hillbilly part didn't bother her because she is proud of her Smoky Mountain heritage. She said that being called a dumb blonde didn't bother her either because she knew she wasn't dumb—which she's not—and, she said, she isn't blonde.

Many people have stereotyped images about priests. One of my favorite personal experiences of dealing with that was being at a dinner with Fr Cary Reniva, my pastor in Beaverton. A couple of people wanted to know what priests read for enjoyment; what is on the tables beside our beds? Fr Cary said he was reading something by a big named theologian. They ooed and awed over that and then asked me the same question. I still cherish the look of utter shock and confusion on their faces when I said: "A Captain America comic." I also enjoy exploding people's brains by showing them the music on my phone. In the course of just six songs you can go from 1940's big band music to old time southern gospel to Bruce Springsteen to punk rock to Loretta Lynn to Swedish heavy metal rock. That's just a taste. The more you listen, the wilder it gets. Don't put me in a box and I'll try not to put you in one either.

The lesson: we need to learn to see past the stereotypes and the categories we put each other into. That is especially true in our relationship with Jesus. The people of Nazareth were denied the full experience of Jesus because they tried to define him and put him in a box; this caused them to doubt him. Jesus has so many things he wants to teach us about himself and so many mighty deeds he wants to work for us and through us but, for him to do that, we must first have faith in him and we must learn to get to know him as he truly is. We have to let Jesus out of the boxes we put him in.