

## COMING AND GOING

In the film *Billy Elliot*, we learn that Billy's father has never been to London. He has probably stayed close to home most of his life. We, who belong to a privileged hyper-mobile society, might be tempted to chuckle smugly at Billy's father's provincialism. But their reality represents the world's norms. Cybernetic globalism aside, most people in our world do not travel far from where they are born. This was the case in Jesus' time as well. A big trip might be to Sephoris, less than the distance from Salisbury to Torrington.

By the time Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth he has traveled extensively around ancient Palestine and even across the Galilean Lake to Gentile territory. We do not know much about Jesus' life and travels before John baptizes him in the Jordan River at the approximate age of thirty. Some propose that he spent time in India, others suggest Egypt. These theories might explain how Jesus came to have such astonishing wisdom and spiritual authority.

In this story, his old buddies in Nazareth go through several stages of reacting to Jesus' return. This account of his rejection by his own kin and townspeople appears in all four gospels. Each rendition concludes that prophets are not honored by those with whom they have grown up.

It is the Sabbath and Jesus is teaching in the synagogue. His audience, which would have been men, is astounded. "Where did this man get all this?" Actually, this is a very good question, one we might ask ourselves, and come up wanting. They see Jesus' remarkable gifts and powers before they recognize the person who has them.

When Deborah and I went to see Luciano Pavarotti live in Boston Symphony Hall for the first time, it was Pavarotti's incredible voice that carried me away, actually blew me away. His gift astonished me. I did not know anything about him as a person. Where did that man get all that? The folks in the synagogue continue to marvel at Jesus. "What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands." So far we see only awe and amazement at Jesus' extraordinary gifts.

Then the tone shifts dramatically as they come to recognize the person they once knew around the village square or in school or at games. "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?" There are several interesting observations to make about this not-so-friendly question. First, Joseph, Jesus' father, is not mentioned. Second, this may be the only time so many of Jesus' siblings are listed, indicating that he came from a large family. Third, while his brothers are referred to by name, his sisters are not, an omission that reflects the male-dominated culture of the time. This last observation will have particular relevance when we begin a short summer course here at St. John's called "*How is she my sister?*" Please see the blurb in the *News for the Pews* for more information.

Jesus' listeners in the synagogue go from astonishment to puzzlement to

hostility. "And they took offense at him." How did this change of perception and attitude happen? It is a familiar story. One member from a circle of friends, or classmates, or siblings or cousins, or business associates...goes away for a time, experiences some internal transformation or physical change, and returns to face a wary or envious crowd. It happens all the time, with family and friends.

I recall an occasion when I came home from college with what my mother thought was long hair, which was 2" longer than a crew cut. She was disturbed by this change and enlisted my father's support in urging me to cut it. (I don't think he cared one way or the other about the hair). This encounter was not unusual in the 60s or perhaps even today. Parents may be shocked or privately grieve the loss of the child they thought they knew. Because they love the child, however, they will gradually realize that the change in appearance isn't that important, and that the child they loved, who has grown and changed, is still there.

It is unlikely that Jesus returned to Nazareth with a Mohawk or outlandish clothing, but the changes *inside* him were so dramatic that at first the villagers do not even recognize him. When they do, they feel threatened. Jesus' straight talk and amazing spiritual powers threaten individuals and institutions...wherever he goes, but most especially back home.

He may threaten us also when he speaks about giving everything away, or taking up our cross and following him to Golgotha, or commanding us to love our enemies. If we try to take these teachings seriously we might see our whole life under threat of radical change. The gospel can be offensive to people like us who may resist change, or find it difficult to let go of the expectations of family or society or whatever "herd" we identify with. Everyone likes to feel liked and included; yet the cost of inclusion may be high with respect to individual growth. Difference in others is not so threatening, however, when we are consciously developing our own gifts.

Envy is one reason "the herd" reacts with hostility towards those whose are different. "I wish I could just be myself but I can't, so I'll be darned if I allow this upstart to have that freedom." In a group or mob this feeling can become lethal. Very likely Jesus fellow Nazarenes and family felt a threat to their social norms and religious mores. Jesus was not one to follow the rules just for their own sake. This first half of today's gospel ends with an acknowledgment that Jesus could do no mighty deeds of power in his hometown, except for a few healings. This is really interesting because it shows that Jesus' often-miraculous powers worked best with the wholehearted participation of the petitioner. He is looking for a readiness and a resonance. On many occasions he says, "Your faith has made you well."

He is not the 18<sup>th</sup> century deistic watchmaker god of the Age of Reason who stands at a distance and manipulates human lives for better or worse. Rather, he is involved and interactive and wants us to meet him at least half way. He cannot accomplish much without an invitation. Compassionate acts usually require a relational reciprocity, a giver and a receiver.

He calls us to repent, which means *turn around*. We have a choice to turn our backs or turn around, as even he himself turned around when the woman with the flow of blood touched the hem of his garment and was healed. He was intensely

curious and wanted engagement with the woman who quickly withdrew into the crowd at first. The spiritual healing of this courageous woman is not complete until she tells her story. In the mysterious alchemy of compassion she and Jesus both give and receive.

Today's gospel comes right after the healing of the woman with the flow. For her, a healing miracle of physical and emotional wounds was possible because she literally reached out for it, practically stole it. For the folks in the synagogue in Nazareth listening to Jesus preach not much is possible because they lack belief. In today's gospel reading there is a contrast of opposites. Jesus is amazed at the Nazarenes' unbelief. They reject him and practically throw him out of town. In Luke's rendition they try to throw him off a cliff.

The second part of the gospel provides the other half of the contrast. Jesus leaves Nazareth and returns to his mission of teaching and healing. Mark tells us that he summons the twelve and begins to send them out in twos, giving them authority over unclean spirits. If his hometown Nazarenes rejected him, the twelve commissioned disciples clearly reflect another kind of response to Jesus. They have faith; they believe him and they follow him. Their faith response is so strong that they are ready to act on it, willing to go out on their own on a mission without their leader.

The lesson ends, "So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent (turn their lives around). They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and they healed them." When they return they rejoice in all they have been able to accomplish.

Unlike Jesus' chilly reception in his hometown, happily, some people who return home as "new men" or "new women" are greeted with joy and festive receptions. When the "prodigal son" returns home after he "comes to himself" and repents, turns around, he is a new man. His father welcomes him back with open arms and throws a big party in his honor.

Returning to the film *Billy Elliot*, Billy defies the expectations of his father and the village concerning what young men *should* do, which is to play rough and tumble sports and *not* become dancers. But Billy is determined to dance. Dancing is who he *is*. In the end, it is Billy's father whose heart finally comes home to Billy. He accepts and even celebrates Billy's remarkable gifts of enthusiasm and dance. Coming home to oneself can lead to small miracles.