

Matthew 13:53-58 Who does he think he is?

The same rules do not apply for dentists as doctors. Doctors are not allowed to treat members of their own families, but dentists are. My brother in law is a highly qualified dentist – in fact he so highly qualified that he's probably not actually a dentist, he's something with a long complicated name which I wouldn't be able to pronounce and which none of us would be able to understand, so, for the sake of all of us here this morning, let's just agree that he is a highly qualified dentist.

So, one day my brother-in-law (the highly qualified dentist) is working in his surgery and he knows that he is going to see his little daughter as a patient for her first dental inspection that day. His wife is going to bring his daughter in later that morning and so as to try and keep things as normal as possible she has only told their daughter that they are going to "the dentist". Having no idea about what a dentist actually does – she's quite excited.

Imagine then her reaction when the surgery door opens and there is her father waiting for her. Well, actually she looked at him and announced with contempt, "That's not a dentist, that's Daddy!"

"Who does he think he is? Stood there in the dentist's surgery, wearing the dentist's clothes, holding the dentist's instruments! The dentist is not going to be pleased when he finds out!" That's what she was saying – "Who does he think he is pretending to be a dentist when we all know he's just Daddy – I was looking forward to meeting a real life dentist and all I've got is this charlatan!"

Well, it's not a million miles away from the events of Matthew 13:53-58. Let me explain. We have spent the last five years or so gradually working our way through Matthew's Gospel and seeing;

The amazing birth of Jesus

His return to Nazareth after time spent in Egypt escaping from Herod

John the Baptist's testimony about Jesus

Jesus' preaching and teaching including the Sermon on the Mount

Jesus' healing ministry

Jesus' authority over creation

Jesus' authority over the devil

Jesus' authority to forgive sin

Jesus' authority over death

All of that has been witnessed by many, many people and now we come to Jesus' homecoming in Nazareth.

Can you imagine what it must have been like? I remember driving into Stilton once and seeing loads of bunting and banners up all because someone who lives there is in one of the Olympic teams and they were returning home after the Beijing Games.

Oh, it must have been like that, mustn't it? No, it seems not.

Matthew tells us that when Jesus returned home he did what they must have been expecting – he preached and we heard some of his sermon a fortnight ago when we read from Luke's Gospel. And at first it looks as though things are going pretty well, Matthew tells us that the people were "amazed", Luke says that "all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips" but that amazement quickly turns to indignation.

What is the problem? Well on the surface everything sounds well and good, but here's the rub, when it comes down to it this is the Jesus they know – he's the local boy, one of them, so where did he get all this wisdom, this challenging holiness, this ability to perform miracles?

“Surely,” they argue, “he’s just the son of their mate Joseph”, they know his ordinary mother – Mary, and why is he so special? Here are his brothers including James, Joseph, Simon and Judas - and his sisters too.

Luke fills us in; the fundamental problem is that they cannot move beyond seeing Jesus as Joseph’s son. Have you ever had that problem? Maybe at school? You never got the chance to be yourself because (for better or worse) you were always labelled as “David’s brother”, or whatever your sibling or parent was called.

And the result of this pigeonholing is that they think that this Jesus has got a bit too big for his boots, what gives him the right to preach to them? He’s one of them, he’s no better than them. And Matthew tells us, “they took offence at him”.

What was the problem? It was that their picture of Jesus was too small. Jesus says “Only in his home town and in his own house is a prophet without honour.” Perhaps we know that for ourselves. At some point we have become Christians in a non-Christian household, or amongst non-Christian friends and the response of everyone at first was gentle mocking, but then as they realised that you were serious about your faith and as you began to live your life out in a Christlike manner, your behaviour has challenged and threatened them and so they have accused you of being “high and mighty” or “holier than thou”.

What they are saying is that they knew the old you and the new you doesn’t fit their established picture of you anymore. You were once one of them, but you have changed and because they have not come with you on that journey, because they subconsciously know that something has raised you up, they feel as though you are looking down on them, or at the very least they are looking up at your godly living, and they don’t like it.

So it is in Jesus' hometown. Their picture of Jesus is a small one: Carpenter like Joseph, son of local girl Mary, elder brother to many siblings, in Luke Jesus (if you will forgive the pun for a carpenter) hits the nail on the head when he says – “all you want me to do is perform the miracles you heard I have done in other towns”.

People are amazed at Jesus because he is the local boy turned great entertainer, but that's where it stops - they don't want him to preach to them, not seriously, not challengingly, they want a bit of a show and a nice story, that's it. They have Jesus in a box and he should know better than to try to break out of it.

But I wonder whether or not we do that with Jesus too. Philip Pullman, the aggressive atheist author, recently wrote a book called “The good man Jesus and the scoundrel Christ” in which he attempts to retell the story of Jesus – now as an aggressive atheist you know that it is not going to follow the events of the historical Jesus terribly accurately, but let me tell you what Pullman does. He splits Jesus into two characters, twins; one is the good man Jesus; a healthy child born at ease with himself as a physical person. Jesus learns carpentry from his father, is the favourite with the other children in the village and grows up to be a passionate character and in love with the world.

In contrast the other twin – “Christ” is a sickly child favoured by his mother, he is the one found in the animal feeding trough by the shepherds and magi, he's the goody two shoes, the creep who tries to endear himself to the religious elite by studying the holy texts and then amazing them with his teaching ability. Pullman then uses this unpleasant figure of Christ to play the part of the devil who tempts Jesus in the wilderness and ultimately it is he who betrays his brother Jesus with a kiss.

Well, it's all far fetched nonsense except of course there are many who like the sound of the good man Jesus; they would have loved him in the Nazareth synagogue. The good man Jesus is the one who stares out of the religious paintings and the stained glass windows with a sad and empty face – he is a good man, a nice man who never really rocked the boat but somehow ended up being nailed to a cross - shame.

The good man Jesus went around healing people, feeding people, being generally “nice” and his great command to us was to be nice too, or at the very least; respectable. The good man Jesus would approve of Sunday best and tradition. But it is not only that the good man Jesus was popular in days gone by, no, the good man Jesus can also be found in countless trite worship songs as well as hundreds of feel good Christian books. He is a regular in the churches which preach health, wealth and happiness as guaranteed through following Jesus and he is definitely there in the modern idea that “Jesus is my mate”, period.

Let's be honest, the good man Jesus is really appealing and that's because he doesn't challenge us. But I would assert that although Philip Pullman's portrayal is wrong, we need to look at the “Scoundrel” Christ, or perhaps more accurately, the “scandalous” Christ; not a twin brother, not a schemer, not a charlatan, not a goody two shoes, but the real Jesus.

The scandalous Christ is Jesus - the man who is God, the man who calls us to live holy, godly and righteous lives in the power of God's Holy Spirit, the one who took our sins to the cross and died for us, the one who is alive again for ever and who will return to judge the living and the dead as we were reminded a fortnight ago.

The scandalous Christ is the one who tells us we need to live radical lives of godly obedience and sacrifice, that we need to take up our cross and follow him, that we need to love our enemies, that we need to acknowledge our status as sinners and rebels, that we need to ask God for forgiveness and praise God for his grace and mercy.

Scandalous!

Jesus Christ is a scoundrel! We thought he was nice and safe – a baby in a manger, a primary school story, someone we knew, someone we could contain, he was small and manageable and controllable by us, he was our traditional, comfortable mate but it turns out that we were wrong!

The big question is, how will we react to him? The towns people who thought they had Jesus all boxed up were offended and scandalised by the real Jesus and because of their lack of faith Jesus was unable to do much amongst them. Are we going to react to the real Jesus in the same way or are we going to explore more about him, discover that he is, if not a scoundrel, then certainly scandalous to respectable society, but scandalous because he turns the world back to God and ushers in the kingdom of heaven through the best news the world has ever heard.

At the very least, the one thing we cannot do is call him the “good man” and leave it there. C.S. Lewis made that very clear when he wrote in his book “Mere Christianity”; “I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say.

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic -- on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg -- or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

Never mind who did Jesus think he was – he was quite clear, the big question is, who do you think Jesus is?