

When I was training for ministry, quite a few years ago now, it was announced that a new vicar had been appointed for my home parish, a large town centre parish on the south coast of England. His name was Stephen. His appointment was rather unusual. Because it just happened to be *his* home parish too. His mother was still there, a faithful member of the congregation. His late father had been headmaster of the church primary school and part of the ministry team at the church. Probably, most people in the congregation knew Stephen or, at least, knew of him.

I was present at his licensing where the bishop, in his sermon, asked rhetorically what appropriate text of scripture could be found to encourage a priest who has been appointed to a ministry in his hometown and church? He could only draw from today's Gospel: 'And they took offence at him..... And he could do no deed of power there.... And he was amazed at their unbelief.'

Stephen also met some of this kind of reaction. He turned out to be not quite what many of his new parishioners had been expecting. He brought some much-needed discipline and a better style to the liturgy. I remember how he encouraged regular worshippers to get in touch with him or one of the other clergy or a churchwarden if they were going to be away on a Sunday, so that their absence would be known about and that there would therefore be no cause for concern. He was also making the valid point that the church is a community in which each member of the congregation and their presence at worship is as important as that of the priest, and the people would certainly notice if the priest was absent without telling anyone and they would not be best pleased! Stephen always managed to upset the complacent with what they fear most: it is called change! There was an inevitable departure of a few malcontents. Fortunately, Stephen survived the proverbial fate of the prophet returning to his own people, and his ministry ultimately thrived. On his watch, the church grew in faith and confidence and consequently in numbers. After 11 years he left the parish in good heart, having been made a bishop, and in a Diocese far away where almost no one would have yet known him.

In the Gospel reading today, Jesus has just completed a frenetic opening of his public ministry, formed a team of disciples, and embarked on a relentless round of teaching and healing, with people flocking to him in droves. And now we have this scene in which he returns home to Nazareth where everyone had

known him as a boy and young man. Everyone knew his family. But, when he goes public, what a shock! His welcome home is treated with a 'who on earth does he think he is!?'

It is not that the people could not hear what he was saying. In fact, the Gospel suggests that the quality of his teaching amazed them. But he failed to make an impact; there was no positive response or change among them as a result of his teaching, because as far as they were concerned, he was just the local carpenter's son. And in a society where an itinerant lifestyle was frowned upon, he may now have been regarded as a bit of a drop-out, who had finally come home with all this cleverness that seemed to have gone to his head.

All the gifts that Jesus had, gifts that had blessed so many people elsewhere, were freely available to the people of Nazareth. But they could not see it and would not accept it. And Jesus sighs with an age-old proverb that a prophet is accepted everywhere, except among his own people. The Gospel makes a subtle point. Nazareth may have been Jesus' hometown by virtue of his upbringing there. But Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee is elsewhere referred to as his home. That is the place where people first had faith in him, and where we find his loyal supporters. Perhaps 'home' is best defined not necessarily by where we come from but where we are most welcome, valued and sustained.

In the Prologue of the Gospel of John, we read: 'He was in the world, and the world did not recognise him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to those who did accept him, to those who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.'

Jesus continues to come to the world. But he comes only where he is welcome. He makes his home with those who accept him. He does not impose himself; and without our faith, our need, our wish for him, he can do nothing. Those would appear to be his rules. But in making the choice for him, freely and faithfully, we can expect life to be different and for the better.

So let us renew our acceptance of Jesus and his invitation today and often. Like the people he was able to teach and heal and forgive, let us come to him who is present to us in this Eucharist, the most particular way he touches us as his disciples and friends today, and an assurance that he is with us always. May

we continue freely to choose him as our compass in life, keep a home in our hearts for the one who was once rejected in his own hometown and among many of his own people. Let us come to him now in our need, our poverty, our hunger, our weakness and receive again the wonderful gift he has to offer, the gift of himself, his life.

By letting him into our own lives we will grow in our resolve and ability to share his Good News, the good news of God's love and acceptance which enables us to embrace a wonderful freedom, peace and joy for ourselves, and a love that welcomes and reaches out to all.