

Jesus has been traveling among the Jews and Gentiles. He has been claimed by God as God's beloved son, he has successfully battled Satan, cast out demons, eaten with sinners and forgiven sins. He has preached the word of God, told some parables about the kingdom of God, healed the sick, raised the dead, and quelled the storm. All creation is at his hand. Time and again he has demonstrated his connection with God. Now he is back again in his hometown. The last time he was there he was surrounded by crowds and his family thought that he was crazy. This time when he preaches in the synagogue, people start to freak out. They cannot believe what they are hearing. They cast aspersions on his family background and want to know how, by what spirit or authority, how he claims his wisdom and demonstrates his deeds of power. In short, they reject him because they don't want to believe, they can't believe in what he is doing - "you can't go home again-ism" is in full force. Their rejection is so powerful that Jesus couldn't do any deeds of power and he is amazed at their unbelief.

What we have here is a classic example of a paradigm shift. The concept of a paradigm shift comes from the work of Thomas Kuhn who applied it to seismic shifts in scientific understanding. These shifts occur when data is found to conflict with the prevailing scientific paradigm. Most of the examples in science are beyond my ken but the paradigm shift with which we might all be familiar is the paradigm shift caused by Darwin's theory of Natural Selection because that theory became the basis for our understanding of evolution. According to the theory of Natural Selection, an organism's inherited traits are passed on through genetics rather than through any adaptation that occurs during the life of the organism.

Paradigm shifts tend to be abrupt and rattle the status quo ... until they become the new status quo although some people will hold onto the old paradigm regardless of the data that is available.

It's easier to see paradigm shifts in science where data can be used to support the paradigm shift but even then, if the data conflicts with the values or beliefs that function within a given organization the shift won't take place. One of the classic examples is what happened with the Challenger Space shuttle. The night before the launch of the Challenger on January 28, 1986, the Morton Thiokol engineers had argued with their management and with NASA that the seals would freeze in low temperatures and that the launch should be postponed. Neither Morton Thiokol nor Nasa officials would budge. They went ahead with the launch and many of us saw what happened on television when what should have been a national triumph became a national disaster.

Jesus' rejection by his hometown shows us how the paradigm works on a socio-political level. The people of the village ignored the data about what Jesus had been doing because of their perspective on his family background, He was a laborer, how could he possibly know and do such things? Their lack of faith, their lack of belief in Jesus means that they short circuit the miracles that Jesus has been performing for those who could see with the eyes of faith.

2,000 years later, we have not seen Jesus perform any miracles in person, but we have the witness and the deeds of what has been done in his name and how lives have been transformed through belief in his name. We call that conversion. Conversion is a paradigm change. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, t'was blind but now I see." To believe in Jesus is a wondrous gift, it reframes our whole world. Our new perspective, our new paradigm accepts that we have been saved by grace through faith, that Jesus is present in our lives, and in our midst when we gather as a community or wherever 2 or 3 are gathered in his name. Our paradigm tells us that Jesus is made present by the Holy Spirit and through him our prayers will be heard by God his Father. That's a lot to swallow but it is what we will be saying in a few moments when we recite the Nicene Creed. When we say "We believe..." we are not reciting a catalogue of facts about his life we are proclaiming our hope and trust in God, that we will feel God working in us and through us. Sometimes the full impact of this paradigm shift happens all at once, more often than not, it is a process, a process full of ups and downs, but Jesus is on our side.

Jesus anticipated the challenges of believing in his name. Remember what he said to the disciples in the Upper Room when Thomas expressed his need to see concrete evidence of Jesus' death. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." (John 20:28)

And when we struggle, and we will, remember the exchange between Jesus and the father whose son is possessed by an evil spirit. The father asks for pity on the family if Jesus is able. Jesus said to him, "If you are able! -- All things can be done for the one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mar 9:23-24)

"I believe; help my unbelief!" When we utter those words, we are praying that we receive God's sustaining grace, that we will be able to see, to feel and to live with the eyes of faith. And when we pray that prayer Jesus will answer. Jesus will answer that prayer, perhaps not how or when we expect, but he will.

"I believe; help my unbelief!"

Amen