

Sermon for Romsey and Lancefield

8th of February 2009

Mark 1:29-39

Together, the gospel readings from today and last Sunday describe a complete day in the life of Jesus. If you remember, last Sunday's reading had Jesus going to the synagogue at Capernaum on the Sabbath and teaching with authority. Then he was confronted by a man possessed, and he rebuked the demon and healed the man. Today, we hear what happened next. In Mark's story of a day in the life of Jesus we are shown more of who Jesus is and learn more about his mission from God. We, Mark's readers, know that Jesus is the messiah, the Son of God, because Mark has already told us. But the people around Jesus don't yet know who he is, and Mark shows us their reaction to this astounding person who teaches with authority, commands the unclean spirits, and heals the sick. As we'll see, some of these responses are models for us to follow. Some are warnings of what to avoid.

It's still the Sabbath, and Jesus returns with the four disciples he has called to the home of two of them, Simon and Andrew. There they tell him that Simon's mother-in-law is sick. This early in their acquaintance with Jesus they probably aren't expecting him to heal her. It's more likely to be an embarrassed apology for the lack of hospitality. There are a couple of reasons that the disciples wouldn't have expected Jesus to do anything. It's still the Sabbath, and if Jesus was going to heal then surely he would wait until after sundown. Then there's the fact that Simon's mother-in-law is, not surprisingly, a woman. Whenever Jesus interacts with women we need to remember that he was living in patriarchal times; times when women were not considered as important as men. In the understanding of the culture of the day, by touching an ill woman Jesus risked ritual impurity and exclusion from the life and worship of God's people. But Jesus takes the risk, and the opposite happens. Jesus doesn't 'catch' unholiness from this woman; instead she catches holiness from him. In the world-view of the day physical illness, like demonic possession, was a sign of the captivity of the world, its possession by evil. And Jesus overcomes this, he raises Simon's mother-in-law up, the fever leaves her as the demon left the man possessed in the Synagogue, and healing and new life demonstrate the coming of the Kingdom of God.

The woman's response is the perfect reaction to the gift of healing and new life: she begins to serve. The word used for serving is *diakonein*, which shares the same roots as the word 'deacon'. It's the word that Jesus will use when he tells his followers that "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve".¹ Simon's mother-in-law has been raised to new life and she responds with service – this is the story that we're all invited to live out in our own lives.

This service is in the home. Mark is a gospel of the home church, the gathering of Jesus' followers in small groups and domestic spaces. In Mark's gospel the church moves from Temple and synagogue to houses; from cities to small towns, and to the wilderness where John the Baptist preached. It's a gospel for us, gathering in small churches in small towns. This is where we come to receive the good news of the Kingdom and this is where we're called to serve. Big churches in cities need to look to the gospel of Luke, with its emphasis on Jerusalem, and the Book of Acts, that takes the good news to Rome. Mark is *our* gospel, the gospel of the small and the marginal and the household.

This day in the life of Jesus ends with the crowds coming at sunset, after the Sabbath, bringing those who were sick or possessed. Jesus cures them; the kingdom of God is among them. Just as today's psalm reminds us that the God who names and numbers the stars is the same God who heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds, so these actions of Jesus in this typical day in his ministry show us that the kingdom of God brings healing and wholeness to the outcast.

¹ Mark 10:45.

The next morning Jesus seeks time alone with God. He rises early and goes to a deserted place to pray. Jesus is not a free agent. Everything he does has its origin in God. But the disciples don't leave him alone. In contrast to Simon's mother-in-law, who serves Jesus, the disciples seek him out, the Greek suggests that they pursue him, and tell him of the crowds seeking more healing. It's the beginning of the insensitivity and misunderstanding that the disciples will show throughout Jesus' life. Rather than giving Jesus the time with his Father that he needs in order to fulfil his calling, the time of prayer to balance the times of work, the disciples want him to fulfil all the needs of the crowds who are seeking him. They want him to work more miracles. But this is not what Jesus has been called to do. His mission is to proclaim the good news of the coming kingdom, and the miracles are ways of embodying and proclaiming that. They are not of primary importance. So the story ends with a description of Jesus' continuing mission: "he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons". He does not stay in one town; he does not give in to the demands of his disciples and the crowds to be a mere wonder-worker. He continues on his journey, proclaiming his message, obeying God.

We know the content of Jesus' preaching: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." This is the message that Jesus proclaims in the synagogues: that the kingdom of God has come near. Everything that Jesus does reinforces this basic good news. His healings overcome the captivity of the world to evil; they restore those who are sick or possessed to the community. Those who have been excluded are now included in a new community centred not in the places of power, the towns and synagogues, but in houses and homes.

Mark has shown us a 'day in the life of Jesus'. For those who read his gospel, it's a day in the life of the Son of God, and we see him proclaiming God's message and teaching with authority and casting out demons and healing the sick, and we know that this is the work of God. But those around him, who don't yet know who Jesus is, have to work out for themselves what this all means. The disciples get it wrong. They interrupt Jesus' communion with God, the One on whose behalf he does everything, and want him to go back to the town and work more miracles, rather than travelling on through Galilee, proclaiming the gospel. So often we will see the disciples getting things wrong, right up to their desertion of Jesus at his death. In many ways Mark presents them to us as examples of what not to do when following Jesus. And yet, we also need to remember that these are the apostles; the people from who we learned our faith. God can make use of anybody, no matter how many mistakes they make, and God can forgive anything and help us start again, as the apostles did after the resurrection.

Mark gives us another example, Simon's mother-in-law, the woman who is healed and responds with service. We don't know her name. We don't know what she did after this encounter; whether she stayed in the house or became one of the women who followed Jesus and came up with him to Jerusalem. We do know that she lives out the advice Jesus later gave his disciples: "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."² We will often be like the disciples, well-meaning but getting things wrong. But we can also try to be like this nameless woman, and respond to the gift of new life that we have been given with service. And Jesus, the Son of God, in his teaching and preaching and healing and times alone in prayer, helps us and shows us how we too can live as children of God.

² 10:43-44.