

3 before Lent The Mission of the Lord Feb 5th 2012 Canon Robert Innes

In his opening chapter, St. Mark introduces us to a day in the life of Jesus. It is the first day of his active ministry. And it's an extraordinarily eventful day. It begins in the morning with a teaching engagement in the synagogue that is interrupted by a man suffering from demon possession. In the evening we encounter Jesus at the home of Simon Peter, the scene of Jesus's first healing miracle. This is followed by a stream of healings and exorcisms running late into the night. Then very early in the next morning, whilst it is still dark, we find Jesus already up and in solitary prayer, seeking divine guidance for his mission, before he heads out into the countryside on a preaching tour. St. Mark leaves his readers in doubt that something dramatic is afoot.

It is significant that the opening action in the gospel takes place on the Sabbath. This, the last day of creation, was a day of rest but beyond this a weekly reminder of the day when God would bring his people the peace and *shalom* for which they longed – of the age, when as the Pharisees thought, God would send his Messiah. So there is no better day than the Sabbath for Jesus to begin his work. Jesus deliberately attempts to bring in that final Sabbath rest...a time when creation will be relieved not just of the toil and distress of a fallen world, but of its bondage to disease, decay and death as well.

In today's gospel reading, we join Jesus on the evening of the Sabbath at the home of Simon and Andrew in Capernaum. You can still visit today the place which is said to be Simon and Andrew's home in this beautiful town by Lake Galilee. And having visited it myself once, I was struck by how small these cottages were – just a couple of rooms and not much space at all. They were ordinary people, a family of fishermen, heavily taxed, working hard to survive. We read that Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever. Well we all know what that is like: the high temperature, aching limbs, spinning head that mean you can't do anything but lie in bed. In the first century this kind of fever might be relatively trivial or it could be extremely dangerous. They didn't have the diagnostic tools to identify the fever and they didn't have modern antibiotics to treat it. And I suppose in their cramped living conditions fevers could spread quickly. Peter and Andrew were probably in their thirties, so the mother-in-law was probably in her 50s – quite old for those times – and she was probably seriously worried for herself, and indeed for the welfare of her family – her daughter and her headstrong son-in-law and his brother.

Into this situation steps Jesus, a man who has already impressed people with his sense of authority. And he touches her. In fact he takes her hand. Touch can be very significant, very reassuring, when you are sick. In fact Jesus was breaking the law. As a woman suffering from a fever she was doubly unclean so far as an unrelated man was concerned. Nevertheless, setting aside the rules, Jesus holds her, and helps her up, and she is healed. As a sign of her healing she begins to wait upon the others. Serving others, *diakonia*, is the hallmark of discipleship. Jesus later says "even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve". So the mother-in-law's service is a sign that her healing is complete and that she has moved from being a patient to being a disciple.

Well I find this a very beautiful and moving story. It's the only miracle in which Jesus heals a family member of one close to him. And it's quite striking that Jesus whole ministry starts from this tender and intimate family encounter.

But things now change rather dramatically. If you've ever been around an orthodox Jewish area at the end of a Sabbath you might have experienced how the atmosphere changes once the sun sets. In modern day Jerusalem, for example, it's the sign that Jews can start driving their cars again. And so for Jesus the pace now picks up. After his remarkable exorcism on the Sabbath morning, news about him evidently spread fast. So, at the first opportunity, and once the Sabbath restrictions were lifted, the sick and distressed people of the town all head for his door. In fact, says Mark, "the whole town gathered at the door". The home of Simon and Andrew is suddenly turned into ad hoc healing centre. Given that it was now dark, and that Jesus himself didn't know the people involved, we can imagine it was a pretty confusing and chaotic situation. We're not told how long this lasted, or how many people were attended to, or how Peter and Andrew finally brought proceedings to an end.

What Mark tells us next is that just a few hours later, very early the next morning whilst it was still dark, "Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed." Now in Mark's gospel there are only three occasions where Jesus goes off on his own to pray. The third time is in the garden of Gethsemane at the end of his ministry; the second time is after the feeding of the five thousand in the middle of his ministry; and the first time is here near the start of his ministry. So each of these is a very significant moment.

There is, of course, no record of what Jesus actually prayed. But we can imagine the issue that confronted him. On the one hand he is a man with a mission. He is God's Son sent to confront the powers of darkness, to announce the reign of God, to make known that he is the saviour of the world. This mission has to be demonstrated in works of power that change people's lives. On the other hand, the needs that confront him are overwhelming. As soon as his reputation is made known people flock to his door and his mission risks being choked at birth by a vast army of the sick, the needy, the tormented. His ministry of healing, valuable though it is, risks becoming a distracting sideshow.

Jesus doesn't have long to think and pray this through. Simon and his companions soon realise that the miracle-maker has disappeared and they are soon out to track him down. "Everyone is looking for you!" they tell Jesus. That's a particularly stupid comment: Jesus obviously knows that – it's exactly why he has gone off to a solitary place!

In reply Jesus indicates a narrower focus to his ministry. "Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so that I can preach there also. That is why I have come." First of all, Jesus knows he must get away from the town of Capernaum where his popularity where he will just be mobbed. Instead he heads out into the more remote villages of the region. Secondly, he indicates a particular focus on preaching. He has a message to get across. He must announce the good news of God's kingdom. We think of his declaration at Nazareth, recorded by St. Luke: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim

the year of the Lord's favour." The good news is that Messiah has come. The Sabbath day of redemption has dawned. And so a whole programme of redemptive work is now going to be put in motion that will stretch far beyond the villages of Galilee and will spread with unstoppable momentum through the whole of the Roman Empire with implications for people all over the world in decades and centuries to come.

What might we draw from and conclude from this fascinating opening to Jesus career as recounted by St. Mark? Let me suggest three things.

Firstly, the importance of the individual. A career which was of world changing significance began in the home of a friend with the healing of a poorly mother-in-law. Jesus showed remarkable attention to individuals. He cared for particular people. So we might ask ourselves, are there any people: in our own family, in our circle of friends...to whom we might owe an especial duty of care at this particular time. With an ex-pat or overseas lifestyle this can be challenging, but it's an important question to ask.

Secondly, the need for focus. Nobody had a wider mission than Jesus. His role was to save the world. Yet even Jesus had to narrow his mission to avoid being overwhelmed. No individual, no church can do everything that needs to be done. From time to time each of us needs to take time out to be with God to clarify our personal mission. I hope to do this later this month with a period of reflective study leave at a theological college in Cambridge. Jesus did this at key points in his life. Particularly those of us whose lives are busy need to be reflective as well as active.

Thirdly, the kingdom is both present and not yet. One of the great conundrums of our faith is why some are healed and not others. What of those in the queue outside Simon's house who arrived too late, or those too sick to travel, or those living in other Galileean cities that Jesus never visited? And what of those in our own time who have prayed faithfully for many years for specific cures that have not arrived? There is no easy answer, and the whole Bible in a sense wrestles with this question. But what we see in this morning's reading, is the dawning of God's kingdom. To use C.S. Lewis' analogy, "the ice begins to melt". The work is not finished, and will not be finished until the great and last day. The opening stories of Mark's gospel focus on God's power acting through Jesus Christ. They offer assurance that amidst all that ails us – for all who battle against illness, distress, physical, mental spiritual oppression or malady of all kinds, Christ works on our behalf to confront all that threatens our well being. The provisional victories made known in those exorcisms and healings point to a decisive victory on the cross in which death itself is defeated and the possibility of a radically new resurrection hope is disclosed. We live in the *now* of a kingdom which is already upon us, and where can celebrate the presence and action of God in our midst in a multitude of ways. We also live in the *not yet* of a world that is still disordered, broken and marred by suffering, where we can only long and pray that God will make his Kingdom come in all its fullness, that the earth may be filled with his glory and that his Sabbath of peace and fulfilment will be made completely known.