

Sermon - manifesting God's purpose

Based on Isaiah 40.21-31, Psalm 147.1-11 and Mark 1.29-39 (NRSV)

The Isaiah/Psalm introduction

- Our scripture passages today start off with an acclamation about the supreme might and omnipotence of the Lord God.
- Both Isaiah and the psalmist do not limit their descriptions of God as one who *'sits above the circle of the earth, whose inhabitants are like grasshoppers'* (Isaiah 40.22) in comparison.
- They also describe the Lord God as having a concern and a delight in those who turn to God - those who *'fear him and wait in hope for his mercy'* (Ps 147.11)
- Furthermore, *'He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless'* (Isaiah 40.29), and *'He heals the broken in spirit, binds up their wounds, and restores the humble.'* (Ps 147.3, 6)
- And this provides a framework of understanding what God then enacts through Jesus, as Mark spells out in the first chapter of his Gospel account.

Last Sunday's Gospel reading

- It is pertinent to be reminded of last Sunday's Gospel passage, because the two passages are of a piece.
- Last Sunday we heard how Jesus, having been baptised, spent time alone in the wilderness, called his first disciples, and then taught in a synagogue in Capernaum.
- His teaching leaves all who hear astounded, because they are compelled to acknowledge the authority of his teaching, compared to the teaching of the scribes.
- Jesus authority in teaching is confirmed by his healing of a man in the synagogue, delivering that man of an unclean spirit.
- In my sermon I suggested that it would be foolish to dismiss many of Biblical accounts of people having evil spirits as merely having mental health conditions.
- Also, that the term 'unclean' means being regarded as unworthy of being able to enter the Lord God's presence to offer worship.
- The rituals of quarantine and cleansing, including associated sacrificial offerings, were meant to restore one to a state of worthiness in which one could once more enter into the courts of the Lord, and be able to participate fully in worship again.
- Thus to be inhabited by an unclean spirit meant that one was permanently unworthy of engaging with God through worship - one's relationship with God was severely handicapped.
- When encountering the presence of Jesus - or the revealed presence of the Holy Spirit within him - the unclean spirit names Jesus for who he is, *'The Holy One of God'* (Mark 1.24)
- Jesus shuts it down immediately, binding it, and then delivering the man from this possession.
- As a consequence of his teaching and power over the spirit, Jesus' fame begins to spread and he becomes the next must see spectacle in Galilee.

Healing the mother-in-law

- And so we come to today's verses, which describe four specific actions:
 1. Jesus heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law;
 2. he heals the sick of the city;
 3. he finds a time and place apart from others, to pray;
 4. and he starts travelling round Galilee.
- I am going to focus mostly on the the first action here.
- The healing of Simon's wife's mother in her home is a significant parallel event to the deliverance of the man in the synagogue.

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- Healers and miracle workers of different faiths would conduct their activities in the public square, because this was essential for business: it provided advertising, and if one were any good, a regular supply of clients.
- And if one undertook the working of miracles in the context of a particular religion, then it was relevant to do that in or near buildings associated with that religion.
- This it was quite fitting for Jesus, the Jewish miracle-worker, to effect his miracle in a public synagogue.
- Conversely, when he's in Simon and Andrew's home, and is informed as to the reason for not being offered the hospitality they would want to offer him - because the person they depended on the most for such a service of hospitality was actually sick - Jesus does not hesitate to undertake this healing privately.
- For the new disciples this would have provided an important contrast to other faith healers, because Jesus was clearly not doing this for show, or to advertise himself.
- Rather, he was doing it because he genuinely wanted people to be blessed with wholeness and well-being.

Shifting to a domestic-centric faith

- Furthermore, this is the start of the next fundamental shift in the social dynamic of the Jewish faith.
- For centuries the social practice of the Jewish faith had been centred on the worship in the temple.
- During the Babylonian exile, the need for synagogues became paramount, and this model of social faith expression - gathering regularly in the local synagogue - became the primary means to achieve this throughout the diaspora across the Mediterranean and Middle East.
- This remained true even though the temple was rebuilt and temple worship re-established.
- And now Jesus comes along, and helps to shift the model of social faith expression into the home.
- Throughout his three years of ministry, Jesus spends time not only in the temple and in synagogues, but also in people's homes, helping people to see and comprehend that God was wanting to connect with people in their ordinary everyday lives - and not only when they intentionally went out to meet with God in synagogue and temple.
- And the early church establishes itself primarily - not from the temple, and not from synagogues - but from people's homes.
- The last supper was in an upper room, and the first Pentecost event was initiated in someone's home.
- Ironically, in helping to make this dynamic shift of the social corporate expression to the domestic context, Jesus was not being innovative, but radical.
- To be radical is to return to the root or origin.
- When Moses gave the Israelites enslaved in Egypt the instruction to each sacrifice a lamb and smear its blood on the lintels of their doors so that the tenth plague visited upon the Egyptians - the death of each first-born son - wouldn't touch them, the Israelites were to enact this saving ritual in household groups, that is, within the domestic context of the family home.
- Jesus, who becomes the ultimate sacrificial lamb, returns his followers to this ancient concept of engaging with God in the context of the domestic home.
- This should be an encouragement for each of us to participate in small family-sized groups, in such activities as the Lent course which will be starting up after Ash Wednesday, or our Saturday morning Focus on Faith and Friendship group which meets most Saturday mornings.
- Those of us who have participated in effective small groups like these, alongside the weekly parish services, can attest to the development of their own faith relationship with God.

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Reflecting further on her healing

- There are some additional points to note about the healing of Simon's month-in-law.
- Firstly, the response of her illness is similar to that of the unclean spirit in the man at the synagogue - the fever is described as leaving her, like the spirit left the man.
- Secondly, Jesus has no concern about approaching her and touching her in spite of her ill-health.
- There was a justifiable concern that if one touched a person who was unwell, it would make one unwell, and thus unclean, too.
- And yet Jesus demonstrates that armed with the power and authority of God, the reverse happens.
- He does not become infected by her fever; rather, she becomes 'infected' - as it were - by his holiness.
- She is affected by wholeness and well-being.
- In fact, she becomes so well that she is able to serve the visitors in her home.
- The third point here is that this is not necessarily a case of misogynistic expectation that the woman should provide the hospitality, even if they have only just got off the sick bed.
- Rather, like most of us when someone visits us at home, we want to provide some kind of appropriate hospitality, and might be distressed and apologetic if something prevents us from being able to do so.
- And so, by being well enough to offer her guests the hospitality that she would like to offer them, the healing Jesus effects is not just a physical healing of her body, but also a restoration of being able to function socially as she would like to be able to do.

Manifesting God's purpose

- My final comments briefly pick up on the other actions after this healing.
- While Jesus did not wait for the Sabbath to be over at sunset to heal the woman, nevertheless everyone else waits until evening, and then crowd Jesus, asking for the restoration to wholeness of their loved ones who they bring along, and also perhaps for themselves.
- As I said at the beginning, God enacts through Jesus what the psalmist describes in today's psalm: *'He heals the broken in spirit, binds up their wounds, and restores the humble.'* (Ps 147.3, 6)
- Even so, those who engage in such intensely spiritual work know how draining this is to one's own body and spirit, and it is no surprise therefore that Jesus, after a short sleep, heads off to a quiet place to be alone with God.
- It is quite possible he would have intentionally prayed through the words of Isaiah and the psalmist, praying to God for strength, and courage, and also not to give into the temptation of fame, but to stay obedient to what God was calling him to do.
- And so when his new disciples, who are keen to jump on board his newly established bandwagon of fame, come looking for him - just like everyone else - because they don't want to let their miracle-worker get away from them.
- Jesus, having re-centred himself with God's purpose, brushes their demands aside, and heads out to the neighbouring towns, so that he can achieve - not his own purpose, nor his disciples' purpose - but God's purpose in proclaiming the message of God's kingdom having come near to his people.