

Epiphany 5 – Wesley 9 & 10.30am – 8th February 2015

Reading: Mark 1:29-39

Theme: “Where are the places of spiritual strengthening and renewal for ourselves?”

Text: “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” Mark 1:35

Introduction

We have begun our journey through the Gospel of Mark – the set Gospel for 2015. Over the past few weeks we have had readings all from the first chapter of Mark which set the scene of this Gospel which begins with the ministry of John the Baptist, flows into the baptism and temptations of Jesus, leads on to the calling of the first disciples and then to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in Capernaum which is a teaching/healing episode in the synagogue from last Sunday’s Lectionary reading. Today we are still in the first chapter of Mark – so much foundational material is found here which informs us about both who Jesus is and the manner in which he will conduct his ministry. So let us look at today’s passage from Mark 1: 29-39 and see what it adds to the picture of Jesus that is building.

Mark 1: 29-39

There are two distinct sections in this reading:

- Verses 29- 34 deal with Jesus going to the home of Simon and Andrew and the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law and what follows from that.
- Verses 35-39 deal with Jesus taking ‘time out’ to pray, to seek guidance on the direction of his ministry and to then move on with his teaching, preaching and healing.

In this first section we find out that Simon Peter is married, he has a mother-in-law, and therefore presumably a wife. Hence at least one of the early disciples was married, even though we know little about the family situation. What we do know is that Simon Peter’s mother-in-law was ill with a fever which was a serious illness in the pre-antibiotic ancient world. Jesus heals her by touching her and lifting her up. None of the chanted secret formulas of the magicians of the day and not even a prayer! As with the calling of the disciples and the healing of the demoniac from last week’s reading, Jesus’ authority, the ‘*exousia*’ from the Greek, suffices. Deborah Krause writes in her book “A Feminist Companion to Mark” (page 39) that when teaching this story ‘many women snort under their breath at the detail of Mark1:31 about her being healed ‘just in time to serve supper’. While this is true, Krause points out that a first-century Jewish matriarch would have been ashamed not to be in charge when guests came to her home. It was an area that she had authority in. Moreover, the word ‘serve’ in the Greek (*‘diakonei’*) , is the same as that used in Acts 6 for deacon, the church office created for those who supervised the distribution of food among the early Christian community. Hence this serving may be seen, not as a subjugation of Simon’s mother-in-law, but as an area that produced positive worth, in a time when women were not thought highly of.

The other aspect to note is that people come to the house, after sunset, to see Jesus and be healed. The Sabbath rest, with the restrictions on travel, is over and so people

are free to come to the home. When we read this we wonder why they didn't come earlier, but we forget the religious laws of the day forbade them to travel about on the Sabbath – there were huge restrictions on what could be done. Hence Jesus 'works into the night' bringing hope. There is symbolism here also that Christ is 'the light' in 'the darkness' bringing healing and hope. Also in a sense here we have the first 'house church' group – an interesting thought!

Now to the second section, where Jesus moves away from everyone for a time of reflection and prayer. Jesus goes to a 'solitary' or 'deserted place'. Traditionally this has been seen as Jesus escaping the mob around him and having time to himself. Certainly there is some truth in this but I also suspect that this was a tumultuous time and Jesus was working through what his ministry was all about and how he was to proceed. In a sense Jesus has been overwhelmed "with the whole town gathered at the door" of the home of Simon Peter and Andrew. Just maybe he was thinking 'What do I do now and where to from here?' were questions that may have been racing through his mind. William Placher in his commentary on Mark writes:

"Mark here juxtaposes the picture of the weak human being and the preceding picture of the powerful Son of God, so that already in these opening scenes there is a mini-summary of the Gospel as a whole.....This one Jesus is both human and divine." (page 40)

As I read this section, certainly the humanness of Jesus comes through. It also reminded me to look afresh at the writings of Henri Nouwen in his little book "Out of Solitude". Nouwen writes:

"To live a Christian life means to live in the world without being of it. It is in solitude that this inner freedom can grow. Jesus went to a lonely place to pray, that is to grow in the awareness that all the power he had was given to him; and that all the words he spoke came from his Father; and that all the works he did were not really his but the works of the One who had sent him. In the lonely place Jesus was made free to fail. A life without a lonely place, that is a life without a quiet centre, easily becomes destructive. When we cling to the results of our actions as our only way of self-identification, then we become possessive and defensive and tend to look at our fellow human beings more as enemies to be kept at a distance than as friends with whom we share the gifts of life.(page 21)

..In solitude we become aware that our worth is not the same as our usefulness (page 22)"

Nouwen's writing adds to our thinking on this passage as well as to challenging us to think about the reflective centre of our own being.

As Jesus is discovered by Simon and his companions, it is though, in this lonely place, he has re-discovered his direction:

"Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." Verse 38

Reflection for Ourselves

As I 'worked through' the Gospel passage for today I was particularly struck by the thoughts, the questions, "Where are the places of spiritual strengthening and renewal for myself?" "Where do I allow myself the quiet, the lonely and the deserted spaces in my life to encounter God?"

More often than not, I do not allow myself that meditative time because I have this protestant work ethic that says I must 'do things' rather than 'take time' to allow God to speak to me, to direct my thinking. Sound familiar in our ever increasingly busy, fast paced world.

For me, this passage is reminding me that I am called to 'make time' for God. To allow myself and not feel guilty, to have recreation and meditative time for myself. My soul place, my lonely place, my renewal place and space, is the beach and the bush. This is not the case for everyone by any means. For many it is music, for some poetry and literature, for others they have their own personal places where they retreat to for renewal. We are all different.

However, this passage is reminding us to nurture that space, to recognise and honour it and allow God to work in that time and place for the spiritual renewal and strengthening that we all need.

The season of Lent is almost upon us and many use this time as a reflective/meditative opportunity in the Christian Year for personal spiritual growth. Within the Parish we will offer opportunities for reflection and I encourage you to use them.

- There will be the Ash Wednesday service on the 18th February at 7pm in the church here at Wesley
- There will be the series of five meditation services held at St Aidan's beginning at 12 noon from the 25th February
- There will be the discussion groups on four different topics from a number of films held in Wesley Hall beginning at 7.45pm on the 18th February after the ash Wednesday service. These will be run by Ockert and Rev Dr Bruce Stevens.

Here are some opportunities to reflect, renew and enjoy your Christian faith. Make time and opportunity for God to work in you, in that lonely place, that reflective part of your life.

Let us pray

Most loving God, help us to find the places where Christ is most accessible. May we find the places where we are personally, and as a community, spiritually strengthened and renewed so that we can move forward in our faith journey with joy, personally and collectively as a community of faith. Amen.