

MARK SERMON SERIES – WEEK THREE

Readings: Mark 5: 24b-34; Mark 6: 6b-13; Mark 7: 1-23

May God speak to us now through his Word by His Spirit. Amen.

For those of you who have been at church the past two weeks, welcome back for the third sermon in our seven week series looking at Mark's gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ according to Mark. If you have not been around the last two weeks or only for one of them, then welcome also and here follows a brief précis of what we have covered so far. In our first exciting instalment two weeks ago, Mike our Rector was giving some background to the gospel as well as looking at the first chapter which included the beginning of the gospel, the emergence of John the Baptist, Jesus' baptism and temptation, followed by his calling of his first disciples (or followers) and his healing of a man with an evil spirit. Last week one of our Associate Priests, Marion, was looking at Jesus' response to the Sabbath (including healing a man with a withered hand), looking at Jesus' relationship with his family, and his stilling of the storm on Lake Galilee. And so to this week, you have your Community Priest who will be trying to shed some light on Jesus' healing of a woman with a haemorrhage, his sending out of his disciples, and Jesus' challenging of the Jewish leaders and some of their rituals. So hang on tight to your pews for a whirlwind dash through some of chapters, five, six and seven, followed by some challenges for us to think about in relation to these readings at the end.

As I was thinking about the story of the woman with a haemorrhage, who had been suffering for 12 years, spent all her money looking for a cure, and only got worse, I was reminded of a story I read in the national press recently. It concerned a man who had lived with chronic pain for twenty years, a pain so great that he felt that he could no longer live with it. Pain of any sort, whether physical, mental or spiritual, is difficult to live with. Some of us here, or watching on the internet, may be going through what feels like unbearable pain at present, it may feel as if it's all too much. If that's you this morning, then take heart from this story. For it describes how this woman, deemed unclean by the Jewish law due to her flow of blood, took the brave (and drastic, you might say) decision to reach out to Jesus. She approaches him from behind (for she does not wish to advertise her presence to her fellow Jews who would have looked down on her) and touches his cloak believing that she will be made well. It was an ancient belief that even handkerchiefs and aprons carried from the person of a healer possessed healing power, as did simply being in their shadow. And it produces in Jesus a very interesting response "Who touched me?". He knows that healing power has gone out of him. And his disciples say to him, "Come on Jesus, you know that people are crowding all around you, how can you say, "Who touched me?". But there is a difference between crowding around Jesus, and reaching out to touch him, or putting yourself in a place where he can touch you. Jesus, it seems, not only wanted to know who touched him, who reached out to him, but he also wanted them to make themselves known to others, that they were responding to Him. And he responds to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well' or made you whole. That wholeness including the healing of her disease but is so much more than that. It is about 'shalom' that lovely Jewish word meaning peace – peace within oneself, peace with others, peace with God.

In our second reading, from chapter six, Mark moves on to describe Jesus' commissioning of the twelve disciples and their being sent out two by two, not only to proclaim the Kingdom of God but also to practice it, through casting out demons and anointing the sick. Reading of this mission charge apparently inspired St. Francis of Assisi to embrace what he called, 'Lady Poverty' and hence the Franciscan tradition to live in poverty, chastity and obedience, that many monks, nuns and lay people still follow today. For the disciples were to travel light for their task, taking nothing for their journey except a staff and sandals – no bread, no bag (for collecting alms in, as itinerant priests in some pagan faiths did), no money or extra tunic. This stripping back to the essentials was an important process for the disciples to go through it seems, learning to rely less on material things, and to lean more on Jesus instead. They were to expect a mixed welcome it seems. Some would welcome their message and others would refuse it – nothing changes it seems in the things of the Kingdom of God. But if people refused their message, they were to shake the dust off their feet against them. This was not to curse them but it was a symbolic action, indicating that people were considered heathen and not yet open to the Christian faith. And the intention was to provoke thought and lead to repentance. So, in essence, the task of the disciples was to expect hardship, to trust in God's care, and to fear no one. That's not often a manifesto we promote with regards to following Jesus today, is it? It all sounds a bit hard, doesn't it? But then Jesus never said it would be easy following him – take up your cross and follow me, he said.

Then in our last reading, from Mark chapter seven, we experience Jesus once again challenging the religious leaders (the Pharisees) and their traditions, just as he did last week over their responses to the Sabbath. I get the impression that Jesus was never a particularly comfortable person to be around, particularly if you were a religious professional like them, and there's a sense in which Jesus deeply challenges me as a priest today too. What am I doing that helps or hinders people in discovering Him? Anyway, the interesting thing in today's reading is that Jesus does not condemn the Pharisees for their religious ritual of washing their hands before eating (to remove the tarnish of coming into contact with the Gentiles) but he does seem to be saying that they are paying too much attention to their religious practices and therefore neglecting the things that really matter. To demonstrate this he gives the example of Corban. Corban was the dedication of one's money to God under oath. It was being used, it seems, as a way of avoiding one's proper responsibilities to make provision for one's parents, and not necessarily actually being given to God either. There is a distinction here, Jesus says, between the tradition of the elders (the Pharisees) and the Word of God. The latter is what is really important, what is actually in the bible as opposed to the customs or traditions that have grown up around it. And Jesus goes on to make the point that it is not certain types of food that are really important (as determined by the Jewish food laws) it is actually what goes on in our hearts that is most important. Here perhaps we can see how Mark has been influenced by Peter's experience at Joppa, where he has a vision of a sail being lowered down from heaven with many different types of animals on and a voice tells him to get up and eat any type of meat.

So what might some of the implications of today's readings from Mark be for us living here in Caversham in the twenty first century then? I want to suggest three. Firstly, are we really open to touching Jesus, like the woman with the haemorrhage, or are we just hanging around him, like the crowd? Are we willing to put ourselves in a place where Jesus can really touch our lives, however difficult or painful that may be to do, or do we want to keep him at arms length, a safe and comfortable distance away from us? It is my experience that opening myself up to Jesus is not

necessarily an easy thing to do but he does promise to be with me, and has been with me, on an amazing adventure throughout life, with all its ups and downs. Secondly, are we willing to travel light as we follow Jesus, like those first 12 disciples? What 'baggage' might be holding us back as individuals, and as a church perhaps? Are our possessions getting in the way, whether our personal possessions or even perhaps the things we treasure here in church, like our pews perhaps? By the way, there is nothing wrong with pews, in case you're wondering what I'm thinking here. I'm merely asking the question of whether our attachment to them might get in the way of our being open to how the space in our churches is used more effectively to share the good news with others? I'm pleased to see that St.Peter's are making some more space for potential mission activities by removing the front rows of pews shortly. Thirdly, thinking of our last reading, are we putting our religious practices in the way of doing God's will, of following the important things, like the 10 commandments for example? So how are we honouring our parents, whether alive or dead, with the money they may have given us? Are we being generous with it? Or, how are we making Sabbath space for God, time to be renewed and refreshed in our relationship with God, rather than being incessantly busy? Or lastly, how are we refraining from the idols of consumerism, status, money?

So, to conclude, may I encourage you to reflect on the challenges presented on the notice sheet this week, and to be prepared to discuss with others here in church over coffee or in your small group what God might be saying to you at present.

Let us pray..

God, give us the humility to make space for you in our lives. Help us to see Jesus' challenge to follow him as a gift and not as a threat. Amen.