

Mark sermon series: Week 2

14/06/15 St Margaret's 11:00

Mark 2:23-3:6, Mark 3:19b-35, Mark 4:35-41

We arrive at the second week in our series of sermons on Mark's gospel. One of the benefits of this series is that you get to hear different preachers each week, each bringing their own thoughts and style to the gospel. I don't know what Jeremy exactly said last week, but I imagine he helped give an overview of Mark's gospel, the history behind it, and particularly the introductory passages from chapter 1. I found myself saying to the congregation at St Peter's that Mark writes in a style that is full of pace, and which doesn't mess around dealing with things he considers unnecessary to his goal of helping understand who Jesus is and what he comes to do. In that way Mark starts of his Gospel, unlike the other Gospel writers, by telling us that this is the "Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" - we are left in no doubt about who Jesus is. He has come, Mark tells us to bring in the Kingdom of God. But that was last week!

Today we have heard three different readings all connected, I want to suggest, to fleshing out what that coming Kingdom is about. Mark is quickly into his stride as he recounts in Chapter 2 Jesus confronting Jewish law. It seems, not long into ministry, Jesus is tied up in the central question of whether organised religion is a help or a hindrance to people's faith. The Jewish religious authorities we know had constructed a system whereby there was a rule for every aspect of life. What you could eat. What you could wear. Where you could go. And especially what you could or could not do on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was after all the day given to Jews by God when they should rest and focus their time on the worship of God. And yet Jesus is seen on the Sabbath picking grains of corn, and healing a withered hand of a man. Both are not allowed activities. Both mean he is blaspheming.

And the question he raises to the Jewish religious leaders is - ought the rules of religion to override needs of the Kingdom of God? When people are hungry, they must eat - whatever the rules say. But we also know that Jesus' comments can be heard at multiple levels. So is thus comment not only about physical hunger, but spiritual hunger. When people are spiritually hungry, should our religious rules stop them being fed? A stark question is being asked of all of us - and most clergy who represent the religious authorities at this point take a sharp breath: how does our religion, with its rules, explicit and implicit, work against the coming of God's Kingdom? How do we ensure that when opportunities to feed come along, we seize them?

But our readings move on.

We hear Jesus talking about the unforgiveable sin of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. Perhaps one of the harder passages for us to digest. But Jesus is urging us to see that, to be focussed on the Kingdom of God means that we should take all care not to work against God, through his Spirit, as the Kingdom comes. And there is the link to the previous passage. For it can be that we get so wrapped up in our own church life, however satisfying we find it, that we miss the Spirit of God prompting us and leading us forward. As we begin a new piece of work this summer through Partnership for Missional Church (you will become very familiar with that name even if you aren't yet), we will have significant opportunities to ask the question "what is God saying to us here in Mapledurham at this time". That is not "what was God saying 20 or 30 years ago" or "what is God doing elsewhere" - but what is it we need to hear. To ask that question and not listen is perhaps on the path to that sin. Can we as a Church community commit to b wanting to work for the coming of God's Kingdom in this small corner of God's creation? Can we commit to being ready to feed the hungry, physically and spiritually? Are we ready to listen to God to discern the opportunities to do that?

And yet, there will be plenty of times ahead when the going seems almost impossible. We have too much on our plate to be able to do more. The responsibilities of looking after the glorious ancient church may be too much. The age of our congregation is against us.

And yet Jesus speaks to those on the boat, as the winds got up and a gale blew and the travellers became frightened. "Peace! Be still!" When Jesus speaks, the storm dies down. "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" he asks. We might find ourselves in many storms ahead, and yet our faith teaches us to trust. For with Jesus, even the winds obey him.

Mike Smith