

Mark sermon series: Week 3
21/06/15
08:00 St Peter, 11:00 St Margaret

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

We come to the third week in our series of sermons on Mark's gospel. In the first week we thought together about the structure of the gospel, and why Mark needed to open his Gospel with the words "The Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God", leaving us very clear from the start that this is no ordinary story, but meant to be Good News that transforms our lives. Last week, from chapter 2, 3 and 4 we thought together about what it might mean to be individuals, to be the Church, of the coming Kingdom of God - the urgency that Jesus has to get his followers to understand that the hungry need feeding, and the sick healing physically and spiritually - and whether we can discern the call of God in our own time to the tasks of the Kingdom here.

Today we reflect on passages from chapters 5, 6 and 7. The call of Jesus to be workers for God's Kingdom - lying at the heart of his ministry and therefore at the heart of Mark's Gospel - is now expanded upon. The disciples, and therefore us, are given more opportunity to reflect on the call of God to every generation to live not for themselves, but for those who don't know of God's love. Squeezed into a story about Jairus, the daughter of the leader of the synagogue, we hear of a woman, found to be unclean because of child birth. It is her desire to be well that brings her to Jesus and to touch his clothes. "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well" she exclaims. Having touched Jesus' cloak her bleeding stopped and she was well. Realising this, Jesus tells her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well: go in peace and be healed of your disease".

Now we must pause and understand the pattern of events. Firstly the recognition that is all is not well with me - I need healing. Secondly, the woman hears the rumour of Jesus - and this leads to expectation and the opportunity for encounter with Jesus. Thirdly, it is only through encounter that healing is found, and her commitment to find it brings faith. With faith in her heart, she is sent on her way in peace. We need to note that faith is not the beginning of the journey, but towards the end. The calling of the Church in every generation is to be the vehicle by which people might encounter Jesus, with all their issues, and find healing and faith. This woman, we are told by Mark, has "spent all that she had, and was no better". How many people today, even with all our advanced medicine, come to the end of their tether, having exhausted all that modern medicine can offer. And still they are not well. The Church needs to be the place that clearly invites people to come to Jesus to be healed and to discover faith. That means we here need to think very carefully about how we place healing at the centre of our ministry. So many people want to find relief for their pains - physical, mental and spiritual.

Our second reading challenges us to understand that to make this offer of Christ's healing available to all, the Church must move from a place of internal focus, to one where it look outward, and be concerned to take this offer of healing in Christ beyond our natural church community. The calling of the twelve disciples and their sending out tells us some important truths about this missionary task. If you notice, the disciples we sent out not on their own, but in two's. All too often we as the church feel under pressure with numbers of people available, and followers of Jesus take on board tasks on their own. But the natural state of mission is to do things with other people - in partnership.

But the disciples were also told to travel light, with no staff, bread, bag or money. It seems the tasks of the Kingdom require us to be fleet of foot, and ready to respond when God calls. This calling to travel light might just mean that the Church of God needs to be ready to do away with much that encumbers it - its rules, its obsession with survival, its desire to tell people how to live their lives - and be ready to trust that God sends us to a place, and in a manner, that God knows is best.

And our third reading warns us of the price of being bound up too much in our rules and lack of real faith. Jesus warns us that rules create hypocrisy, because we forget what we are really being asked to undertake as a Church. We are called to go out from our churches to proclaim the free offering of God's love that brings healing to all who trust in it. It is what we call in the Church, the Grace of God. Ours is a calling, not to be bound up with ourselves, but to call unexpected people to Jesus, to shine God's love into the darkness - to be less self-serving, to be less-noticed.

People in Mapledurham and Caversham are desperate for what the free offering of God's love - but they need to know that God loves them and wants them to be healed. Our calling is nothing less that to be people that live for the sake of our parishioners. These coming weeks and months I hope will give us the space together to begin to think together how we might move towards an approach that makes that offering more real to people's lives.

Mike Smith