

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany 15.2.2009

Mark 1.4-45 *Healing the leper*

The first chapter of Mark's Gospel gets off to a quick start with the statement, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." In the very next verse Mark introduces John the Baptist who then appears announcing the coming of the Lord. A few verses further down, Jesus himself enters the story - already an adult - on the occasion of his baptism. Immediately afterwards he is driven by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted, after which he returns to Galilee proclaiming his message "the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news."

He then calls his first four disciples, and together they enter the town of Capernaum. On the Sabbath in the synagogue Jesus teaches and performs his first miracle curing a mentally ill man. From there he goes straight to Simon's house to cure Simon's mother in law who is ill with a fever, and that very evening, many who are either ill or possessed by demons flock to the house to be healed by Jesus.

First thing the next morning Jesus decides to move on to other country towns to proclaim his message, preaching the good news and casting out demons. At the end of Chapter 1, which concludes with today's account of the healing of the leper, we're told that news of him had already spread to the point where he could no longer show himself in any town and even then people kept flocking to him!

There is a tremendous sense of haste and excitement in this very concise first chapter; the word 'immediately' or 'at once' appears numerous times, people 'flock' to see Jesus, they are 'astounded' at his teaching and dumbfounded by his miracles. Jesus heals countless numbers of people and of a multiplicity of disorders. News spreads fast, far and wide. One has the sense of widespread human need, of disorder and brokenness in society and of this Jesus as the remedy - the answer to human need.

The story of the healing of the Leper is a microcosm of the whole Gospel about people in need and of Christ's ability to heal. The leper is poor, sick, and dying, a man who - because he is suffering from an incurable and contagious illness - is also an untouchable, a social outcast and religious pariah. In spite of this, he courageously approaches Jesus,

falls to his knees before him and with total confidence in his godlike authority and his power to heal, begs Jesus to cure him. Moved with pity, and in response to the leper's astonishing faith that "if you choose, you can make me clean", Jesus instantly responds, reaches out, touches this untouchable and makes him well. Confronted by sickness, prejudice, and segregation, Jesus is at once moved to act, to eradicate the evil from which this man suffers; he is not only physically cured but also restored to his family, friends and society. His life is renewed. The original translation has it that Jesus was not moved by pity but by *anger*. We're often outraged by injustice, aren't we; our blood boils. I can imagine Jesus would see the leper's situation as an affront, contrary to God's plan for creation and would want to make it good - for that, he told his friends, is what he came to do!

After the episode, Jesus continues on his way preaching and teaching, healing the sick, casting out demons and forgiving sins with crowds of people in need following him. And to what end? In order to restore broken bodies, minds and souls, to re-create peoples lives. Here is God among us showing what God can do, Jesus showing us by his teaching and by his miracles (both of which proclaim the same thing) that there is another way, that things might be other than they are, that where people are blind they might otherwise see, where they are lame they might walk, where they are hungry they might be fed, where indeed they are written off as good as dead, they might live. We don't need to see Jesus' miracles as magic acts; rather as demonstrations, illustrations, of what God means by renewal, re-creation, and good news that life can be other than it is, as God intends in his plan for Creation.

How then are we to do Christ's work of healing in a world evidently still the same as that into which Jesus was born - a world of sickness, hatred, prejudice, injustice, human suffering, a world of sin and alienation, where hordes of us are hungry for renewal and healing?

We can't perform miracles but we can heal by reaching out to those in need, expel evils in society, restore those who are written off, lift up, bring in, reconcile. It is in our nature to care for others, made as we are in the image of God, and there are signs of God's Kingdom all around us if we look, such as at present the amazing support being offered to the bushfire victims. We believe as Christians that our purpose is to reflect Christ's love to the world, to be compassionate, approachable as Jesus was to the leper, ready to reach out and touch and cross the divide that separates people from one another, to break down barriers. To be

Christ like not just as individuals, but also as a Church, this Anglican parish church of South Yarra - approachable, accessible to all, inviting everyone to hear and experience the good news of Jesus Christ, the Great Physician.

We are, however, not only challenged to see our world as Jesus does but are to look within, into our own broken lives in need of healing, our own imperfect Christian lives and - like the leper - ask for healing. "Lord I am not worthy to receive you" we say before the communion, "but only say the word and I shall be healed." We may discern no noticeable or progressive healing in our lives but that's not for us to be anxious about; only to keep open our relationship with God, approach God in full confidence that he can and wants to reach out and heal us, and that he will treat us with the same affection and acceptance as Jesus treated the leper. "If only you will, you can heal me" says the leper. "Of course I will" says Jesus, and promptly heals him. We may approach the unseen Lord Jesus with the same confidence, be touched by him and have absolute faith in his power to heal and renew our lives.

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