

Year B 2021, Mark 1.29-39

Last Sunday we were with Jesus and the first disciples in the synagogue in Capernaum by Lake Tiberias in Galilee. There he exorcised an unclean spirit or was it spirits? Today's gospel begins where last Sunday's gospel left off. We are still in Capernaum. It is still the same day. It is the Sabbath. And it is from the synagogue that Jesus and the disciples make their way to Simon's and Andrew's house, where Jesus lifts up (raises) Simon's mother-in-law ridding her of a fever whereupon "she began to serve them". It is helpful to put this picture of Peter's mother-in-law serving the disciples into the larger context of Mark's gospel. Firstly, we should remind ourselves that after Jesus was baptised he was driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit for forty days, "tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." It is the picture of the angels, those messengers of God waiting on Jesus that I want us to see alongside Peter's mother-in-law serving the disciples and now to remind ourselves of what Jesus says later in Mark's gospel about the purpose of his ministry, "For the Son of Man (Jesus) came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus here describes his life as one of service and as sacrifice "giving his life as a ransom for many" through which we are set free. We are lifted up. We are raised.

Now keeping the above in mind, Jesus' lifting up of Simon's mother-in-law, thereby ridding her of a fever takes on a significance that transcends that moment in time. Those who are lifted up by Jesus, who know that he is a ransom for many, also know that their lives are to be characterised by service. Over the years we have often talked about this fundamental aspect of life in general and of the Christian life in particular. Life lived in the radiance of the divine image is to be characterised by Jesus' example of

service, which Jesus models as leader, shepherd, Teacher, as healer, as exorcist and as a ransom for many.

Having the angels in mind who waited on him Jesus' service is not only a service in the service of humanity, but also strikingly in the service of God and in whose service he, Jesus, will give his life as a ransom for many. In John's gospel we hear Jesus say, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (John 12:32) The picture of the angels waiting on God reminds us that Jesus and God, whom Jesus calls Abba, Father are in a relationship. There is mutuality. There is an exchange and we will return to this exchange based on innermost relationship in a moment. But let's not miss having referenced Mark's account of the Temptations that we will come back to in two weeks' time on the first Sunday of Lent that Jesus is with the wild beasts. I am reminded, we are reminded of the Prophet's prophecy, "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them." (Isaiah 11.6) We recall Mark begins his gospel stating, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus the Christ meaning Messiah, the Son of God."

We return to the gospel we are considering. As the Sabbath ends "That evening, at sundown" people in Capernaum and the region having heard of what has taken place in the synagogue during the day bring to him their sick and those who are possessed, and many were cured, not all but many. How might we do the same today? There are two ways. The first is through either bringing people to church for anointing and the laying on of hands, using this wonderful space that our community that stretches well back into the 19th century built, set aside for the worship of God, and as a place of prayer and healing or by calling on the church and in particular the clergy to make a house visit. Today's gospel is the first house visit of the Church. Jesus does

go to the sick and the dying and even the dead in their homes, but for the most part they came to him as vividly told in this account of his ministry. The healing ministry of the church coupled with its teaching ministry is a ministry of service in the service of God. The other way is to bring people to God in personal prayer. More in a moment.

Finally, we arrive at one of my favourite passages in the gospels. It is a picture of Jesus retreating to a deserted place to pray before the break of dawn. Before the fisherman went to their boats to go fishing. Before Simon's mother-in-law and others in the household began to busy themselves with domestic economy. Did Jesus go down to the lakeshore? Did he go up into the mountains? One can well imagine him by the lakeshore hearing the water gently lapping on the shore with a full moon the water glistening or him going higher to look down over the lake and to await sunrise. The picture of Jesus busying himself to find a deserted place to pray reminds us of how central the life of prayer was to Jesus' ministry; and how central it must be to the life of the Church and to our lives, whether it comes easily or not. Some have to work at it harder than others, but work at we must. Prayer is Gottesdienst. It is God service. There is another episode when the disciples come back to Jesus having been commissioned by him, telling him how they were not able to heal all and cast out unclean spirits. He refers them to prayer: such can only be cast out by fasting and prayer. Jesus Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus who lives amongst the wild beasts and is ministered to by angels and who says of himself that "... the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." This Jesus is a person of prayer. And prayer is a characteristic of the innermost relationship between God and himself the Son. It is on the examples of his prayer life that we are to model our prayer lives as a church and as those called by him into the service of God and the world. You might say these instances are sketchy, but to my

mind they suffice. They put prayer at the heart of our lives. It doesn't mean we are good at it. It doesn't mean that we know what effects it has – how it works, you might say. What we do know is that if we neglect it, we do so to our own impoverishment and the impoverishment of those around us. We also know that we are not being faithful, and that the modelling we are called to is less than it could be.

I want to point out that we have been praying for scientists over the last weeks and months asking that they be in-powered, guided to find a vaccine; and “the miracle”, if I may speak in such terms, is that there isn't only one vaccine there are quite a few and all these in record time. Something that we should acknowledge and be thankful for. Personally, in passing I am for the high standards such as the EU requires, but then this must be true of all that we do. Even though we may fail, we want to do whatever it is to the best of our ability. What I just said is in no way is to take away from the achievements of the discipline of science or scientists with a moral compass in creation, but to see things working in unison, working hand in glove. Throughout the pandemic we have always known that spiritual, emotional and relational well-being remains crucial for healing. It was and has never been just a matter of physical health. I am grateful for the basic rules of life that have carried me thus far through the pandemic.

Lent meaning spring is fast approaching. Ash Wednesday is in ten days. Can this Lent become for each of us a “deserted place” of prayer. If this is to be the case we must get up and go to it. We need to be intentional, as Jesus was intentional. Jesus got up and went to a deserted place, and there he prayed. Jesus' ministry was extraordinary. It begins in Mark's account with the heavens being torn open and the spirit descending on him like a dove. Throughout his ministry it is permeated with prayer. It is a ministry

characterised by service during which Jesus expends himself in the service of God for the sake of creation, for the sake of the world and for your sake and mine in mercy, with compassionate and through a love that can be compared to that of a parent for its only child.

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