

SUNDAY 5B BIRKENHEAD 2020

The Reverend Jordan Greatbatch

Isaiah 40:21-31

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Mark 1:29-39

1

Mother in law, healing, demons and proclaiming the message. This is the odd combination of themes in this morning's gospel.

The mother in law is an important detail in this story. It is the only time we hear that Simon Peter was married. Can we then make an assumption that other disciples were too? It's an interesting speculation because it helps us to see the ordinariness of these people who were with Jesus. It also shows us the concern Jesus has for the family of those close to him. Simon's mother in law had a fever. Which outside of COVI-19 doesn't sound particularly serious. Jesus takes her by the hand and she recovers. Sometimes Jesus speaks a word of healing, sometimes as here there is simply the touch. Sometimes there

is both word and the sacrament of touch. Mother in law then gets up and serves. Some react against this detail in the story. The poor woman has no time to get used to her recovery and she is back to her subservient position.

2

However if we look at this in the whole context of Jesus ministry we see that this is the natural response to anything Jesus does. Service is the way we show gratitude to God for what he has done for us. Jesus says he came to serve not to be served. He sets the example that we are to follow. Service is the natural response for Christian people.

It is clear from this small incident that Jesus heals. Mark then goes on to relate a bigger picture of healing. The whole city was gathered around the door is how Mark describes it. Clearly Jesus healed many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons.

Healing of the sick is such a constant occupation of Jesus. It is also one of our constant concerns. We all seek health and well being. When anything goes wrong we worry until we find out what is ailing us. Today we tend to see healing, both that of the medical profession and that done by the church, as simply the removal of physical disease. One has only to see the advertising about the variety of things we can take to make our bodies healthy. We are bombarded with information about foods and potions which will make our bodies fitter and healthier than they have ever been before.

Whenever a church holds a healing service, the object is usually about getting rid of physical disease. There are sometimes lots of explanations about why that might not happen. People also express this need for physical health when they say "I have my health and that's all that matters." I know health does matter, and it is something to rejoice over when we have it. But I

feel somewhat uneasy when I hear comments like this.

What will happen to those for whom good health is all that matters, when they lose their good health? Not only may health be lost, but all the prayers, medicines, surgery and anointing bring about no healing, no restoration of physical strength. That has been the case for many people. They have placed so much in saying "I've got my health and that's all that matters," that when health fails, then there's not much else left.

No amount of medicine, no amount of prayer, can change the physical or mental disability of some people. We have to learn to live with some of these imperfections of life.

You see healing is not simply the removal of physical disease. Very often Jesus seeks other sorts of healing as well as the physical. His teaching is clear that sometimes forgiveness brings healing, sometimes the giving away of

possessions brings healing, sometimes a change of lifestyle brings healing, sometimes thanksgiving brings healing.

5

It's not the healing that brings wholeness. More often it's the forgiveness, the giving away, the change of lifestyle, the thanksgiving that brings wholeness. The wholeness comes because we are in right relationship with God and with other people.

And what of these demons mentioned here and in other parts of the gospel. In Jesus day demons were always associated with sickness. Both demons and sickness prevented fullness of life. They destroyed life as God meant it to be. It is only natural that Jesus would get rid of both. He was constantly trying to get rid of the things which spoiled life.

We don't talk much about demons these days. I doubt many would even think about them as separate beings. We do however still talk about

demonic acts committed by some people. When we see senseless violence perpetrated we may sometimes interpret that as demonic and evil. So the thought of the demonic is around even if we don't personify the evil as caused by demons. So casting out demons was a concern of Jesus.

6

For Jesus ministry was getting rid of anything that opposed God who was the bringer of goodness.

Yet it is also clear that the gospel writers did not present Jesus as a miracle worker alone. It was not the primary purpose of Jesus to remove the inconvenience of suffering from the world. Jesus shows the removal of the things that are wrong with the world will come about as the by-product of his main purpose. His main purpose is to show that the way of love is the way of God, and that we are to love as he loves us. This is the love which changes people. It's demanding and it's challenging. This love goes to the root of the problem and doesn't just deal with the effects.

There are some diseases that doctors deal with and they can deal with the cause. With other diseases they are only able to treat symptoms or the effects of the disease. Jesus was not simply dealing with the symptoms of disease in humanity, but with the causes of our disease.

7

Jesus says the cause of our problems lies in our distorted attitudes to life and to God. It's this attitude that Jesus deals with, the cause, not just the symptom. This is the message he continued to proclaim in his ministry.

And so I believe the Gospel calls us to more closely at the causes of the many dis-eases in our society to which we are prey, and deal with those causes rather than going on treating the symptoms. With the rise of social problems such as gangs, drug addiction, murder of children, depression and suicide. We often think the best way to cure these ills of society is to simply throw money at them, i.e. government assistance. But

we see this happen time and time again and the problems don't seem to go away. Now you may call me old fashioned but it seems these problems stem from the classic issues around the decline of social structures that held society together. These unfortunately have no quick fix. As the economist Thomas Sowell says *'Much of the social history of the Western world, over the past three decades, has been a history of replacing what worked with what sounded good.'* And therein lies the temptation. People love to expound how kind and caring they are at any turn. But does that really change anything? It is easy for politicians to say these things because they *sound good* to the voter base. But again what do we actually achieve. Jesus teaches us a more challenging way.

He focused his ministry on those who were unable to repay him. And so we too need to focus our ministry on those who will not be able to repay us. We should avoid the danger of using their needs as a way of self-aggrandizing. God's preferential option for the poor is written all over the New Testament and our challenge is how to

preach it without using it as a justification for our personal agendas.

How we become a better society is really the question. We need to keep asking how we can develop better communities, how we can assist people to express their needs, how we can foster loving relationships between people? If we can keep doing that then I believe we really begin to tackle some of the health problems of our own communities.

8

So mother in law teaches us that service is the result of our response to God's love. The removal of anything that spoils life as God intended it to be is also our concern. Proclaiming the message of God's love will help us to do both service and the removal of that which spoils life. This will help improve our society as well as our church. We share this Eucharist to be strengthened for our task and work in the world.