

## **Sermon for 4<sup>th</sup> February 2024, Year B, 5<sup>th</sup> after Epiphany**

**Preached at St John's Baillieston**

**Mark 1:29-39**

### **Sermon**

Finally, we move out of Christmas and Epiphanytide, when the vestments were white and gold, and back into a very brief moment of Ordinary Time, before we rush breathlessly on into Lent.

Although we've barely begun the year, it already feels like everything is rushing ahead at break-neck speed. Jesus has been born, the wise men have visited, he's presented by Mary and Joseph at the temple, and now suddenly Mark's gospel takes us headlong into the beginning of Jesus' ministry – and that too is immediately frantic, what with preaching and healing, and the disciples scurrying around trying to find Jesus whenever he tries to get a moment to himself for prayer. "What are you doing Jesus? No time to sit around praying – you're supposed to be helping people!"

The word that most characterises Mark's gospel is 'immediately', which the writer uses 41 times. Just in this first chapter, Jesus has already been baptised by John, tempted by the devil, seen John put in prison, begun to preach, recruited several disciples, performed an exorcism, and now he arrives at the house of Simon's mother-in-law on the Sabbath and discovers that the poor woman is ill in bed with a fever, and so, of course, Jesus immediately heals her simply by taking her hand and helping her up, and she responds by beginning to wait on him and his disciples.

Back in Jesus' day, there was often an assumption that if someone was sick then it was because they had sinned, and until they figured out what they had done, repented and made amends, they couldn't be healed, but there's no hint of that

here. Instead, Simon's mother-in-law is raised up as if in a sort of resurrection. In fact, the same Greek word is used as when Jesus himself is raised.

Now, I don't know about you, but I've always been slightly irritated by the fact that once this woman is healed, she's immediately expected to return to her woman's duties and serve the apparently lazy men – and on a Sabbath too, the day of rest! It's almost like Simon has dragged Jesus along because if his mother-in-law isn't fixed up, there might not be any supper!

But there is another way of reading this. Instead of seeing the woman as being under the domination of men with no agency of her own, she has often been honoured by later Christians as being the first person to understand and embody the message that Jesus is trying to bring – that having experienced God's love, our calling becomes one of sharing that love with others, through serving those around us. Just as we are shown tenderness and compassion, so we become more like Jesus, and more like God, and naturally begin to do the same for other people. This is how God's kingdom spreads. So, in a sense, the healed mother-in-law is the first person to join with Jesus in demonstrating what the gospel looks like – not just words, however beautiful, but kindness and generosity in action.

Simon and the other disciples won't truly understand this until Easter. *They* didn't understand that Jesus had come not to lord it over people but to serve and to give his life for all people. Simon's mother-in-law, on the other hand, understands immediately.

It's worth noticing, as well, the importance of touch in Jesus' ministry. His healings almost always involve some degree of physical contact. It's not that touch is necessary for such healing to occur – Jesus heals a centurion's servant without ever meeting him, for example – but there is a sense that touch here is a sign of intimacy, friendship, presence, relationship. Some theologians argue that to be made in the image of God means precisely that we are created for

relationship – open-hearted connection with one another. And I’ve read – and experienced – that healing and recovery from illness, and spiritual growth, often goes much better when you’re supported by a kind and loving group, rather than facing it all alone.

There are many spiritual leaders throughout history who have taught beautifully and profoundly about how to be human, but there are far fewer who have demonstrated clearly what their message looks like in practice. As the American theologian the Revd Dr Buddy Enniss has written, “Love not expressed, love not felt, is difficult to trust. Theologically speaking, that is the reason for God [being incarnated as a human being]. God knew the human need for nearness. Jesus is the incarnation of God’s love, which makes it all the more demanding (if frightening) to realise that for some people, we are the only Jesus they will ever meet”. Definitely something to ponder!

After Simon’s mother-in-law is restored to health, she gladly serves others. This is how Jesus himself spends his life, and what he calls all his followers to do. In contrast, Simon, who represents all the disciples, does little in this gospel story except to try to boss Jesus around and compel him to come back from his early morning time of prayer and get back to work!

One of the most wonderful things, I think, about the gospels, is that they are all so comfortable with criticising the people who think they are important and part of the in-crowd, while praising those who are most humble, generous, and self-giving. I wonder sometimes how the disciples let it all get through the editorial process, since our readings invariably make *them* look clueless or selfish, while the women – even those cruelly afflicted by social stigma – are so often portrayed as understanding Jesus’ message instinctively and profoundly.

It would have been so easy for the men writing down these stories to paint themselves in a more positive light, but it’s to their credit that they almost never do so. To me, this not only adds to the believability of what we are reading, but

also encourages me that the Christian faith is not for moral perfectionists, but for all of us who know that we need a community of kindness, forgiveness, compassion and helpfulness all around us, if there's to be any chance of us becoming the sort of people that we (and God) so clearly long for us to be.