

Fifth Sunday 5 February

As I read the lessons for this Sunday I wondered why these three lessons and the psalm had been grouped together to be read this Sunday. I started doing some research on the passages and gradually a strong theme started to come through. It wasn't a simple theme, like "accept Jesus as your saviour and everything will be ok" so I was tempted to ignore it and concentrate in this sermon on something simpler – such as why poor old Peter's mother-in-law, having been made well by Jesus had to go off into the kitchen and start serving food to others. Or perhaps the wonderful fact that Jesus had to rise early and go away from the hub-bub of the world to pray to his Father.

But then I thought, "No, you deserve to explore the ideas that the readings present even if the ideas do not seem that clear." So I hope that you will be willing to engage your thinking minds and follow the logical flow that these lessons present as we try to see what the theme is.

This is the year of Mark and perhaps you need to be reminded a bit of the background of his Gospel. Firstly I need to remind you that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are not four different biographies of Jesus. No, they are "Gospels", which is an old English word derived from the words "Good News". So their task is not to tell their readers the life story of Jesus but rather to give what the different writers believed was the Good News of Jesus Christ. Although Mark's Gospel appears after Matthew's Gospel in the bible, practically all commentators believe that it was the first Gospel written. It was written in about 60AD – some 30years after Jesus' death on the cross. Furthermore, Matthew, Mark and Luke are what we call the Synoptic Gospels – "synoptic" meaning look-a-like because similar episodes occur in all three Gospels. Because of this some commentators suggest that there must have been a separate source that all three Gospel writers drew on. This separate source is called in academic circles, Q the German word "Quelle" meaning "source" but it of course could have been more than one document.

It is believed that one of these source documents might have been a list and description of the miracle healings that Jesus did. Certainly today's Gospel reading seems to concentrate on an awful lot of healing miracles. Firstly, the demoniac in the synagogue we heard in last week's Gospel, then Peter's mother-in-law and then the crowds who gathered around Peter's house at sundown seeking healing.

I said just now that the task of the Gospel is to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ. But what is the Good News of Jesus Christ? That he can miraculously heal all types of illnesses? Or is there something more? What attracts you to Christianity? The healing power of Jesus? Or something more? Well, Mark makes it pretty clear when he says: *Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'* The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

The second part of today's Gospel shows Jesus rising early and making his way to a deserted place to pray. He realised that his missionary task WASN'T merely to bring healing to the ill but to bring the Good News of the change in human being's relationship with God. The disciples go looking for Jesus. 'Everyone is searching for you,' they say. They seem to believe, with the people, that Jesus' task **was** just the miraculous healing of deaf, blind dumb, demoniac and the lepers. "Come on," they seem to imply "the people are waiting for you."

But Jesus has a different idea. His response: *'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.'* That is what I came to do. Remember this because I'm going to come back to Mark just now. But first let's look at Paul's letter to the Church in Corinth.

Here we need reminding that it was the Letters of Paul that were written well before any of the Gospels. They would not have had Mark's Gospel to tell them what Mark believed Jesus' mission to be - *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'*

But perhaps they too had the earlier source documents listing and describing the healing miracles of Jesus. Those who opposed Paul would have been disappointed in him. Why? Because he refused to take money for his preaching. They believed, like I do, that if you are getting something for free, then it will not be respected as much as something you've paid for. Furthermore they believed that Paul wasn't asking for payment because he lacked confidence in his authority as an apostle. Also Paul wasn't doing healing miracles as described in that collection of healing miracles of Jesus, so was he really a follower and servant of Jesus? Paul agreed that he had a right to be paid

but he didn't want to appear to be like those wandering preachers who rocked up in Corinth and sponged off the congregation giving them what Paul believed to be a false understanding of Christ – a Christ whose sole task was healing of the sick. If Paul asked for money they would misunderstand his Gospel. They would take it for the preaching of another Christ – perhaps a miracle-worker but not Christ crucified which was what Paul believed he had to preach about.

So what role do the healing miracles of Jesus in Mark play? They are merely a subordinate feature of Jesus' ministry. His main purpose, like that of Paul was to preach the Good News of the Kingdom.

Have you noticed how Jesus always tells the demons he casts out to be silent? You see, the demons "knew him" because they recognised him as the Holy One of God. But to be called by that title was dangerously misleading for Jesus, because it implied that he was merely a wonder worker. In Mark's Gospel it is left until the very end, with Jesus already dead upon the cross before he can be rightly called the Son of God by the centurion at the foot of the cross for the Jesus the centurion sees is not the wonder worker but the crucified one.

Another danger arises here however. It is the danger of us Christians thinking that we are here merely to suffer. At first reading this appears to be what the reading from Job is saying. But as Book of Job does not come up often in the Lectionary, let me place it in its context for you. It is part of what is called, "the writings". In other words it is a poetry book discussing the deep philosophical question about innocent people suffering. Job is rich and successful but is suddenly overcome by calamity, both domestic and economic. There follows a poetic dialogue between Job and his three friends who seek to comfort him. In their first discussion together they get to the point of wrestling with the problem of suffering. No longer can suffering merely be interpreted as a direct punishment for sin. Job had been righteous and maintained his integrity yet he suffered. What Job had to learn was that a person's righteousness gives him no claim on God. It is, if you like a forerunner of the Pauline doctrine of justification by the grace of God alone.

Now the Old Testament readings in the RCL usually reflect the theme of the gospel. So how does Job's suffering fit into the Gospel? Is it saying that we have to suffer like that to be a Christian? Some Christians seem to interpret it that way. But perhaps Job is showing us the very human suffering he underwent, is the very human suffering that Jesus had come to remove us from, to save us by his death on the cross and his resurrection.

So Mark's Good News about Jesus points primarily to his death on the cross and his resurrection for us. If that is the case, how are we to approach the healing miracles then? Are we to ignore them? No, not at all. These miracles are the pre-figuration of the ultimate messianic miracle, which is the cross and the resurrection. These miracles are the preliminary acts of healing that foreshadow the greatest act of healing that Jesus gives to us all in his death and resurrection.

These miracles act as an encouragement for us as we, like Job, wrestle with the difficulties of life. So we can join the psalmist and say

O praise the Lord, for it is good to sing praises to our God ...

He heals the broken in spirit : and binds up their wounds....

The Lord restores the humble : but he brings down the wicked to the dust.

... the Lord's delight is in those that fear him : who wait in hope for his mercy.

We wait in hope and at Candlemass season I can say that we wait in the same hope as Simeon did until Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to the temple

Listen to words of the anthem the choir will sing [at the 9,30 Service]

When to the temple Mary went,

And brought the Holy Child,

Him did the aged Simeon see,

As it had been revealed.

He took up Jesus in his arms

And blessing God he said:

In peace I now depart, my Saviour having seen,

The Hope of Israel, the Light of men.

Help now thy servants, gracious Lord,
That we may ever be
As once the faithful Simeon was,
Rejoicing but in Thee;
And when we must from earth departure take,
May gently fall asleep and with Thee wake.

The sure and certain hope of Israel is ours too. It is not because Jesus was some miracle worker but because he died on the cross and rose again for us. Amen