

Epiphany 5 (2nd Sunday before Lent)

Last Sunday we heard the previous paragraph of Mark's gospel, about the miraculous healing of a man with an unclean spirit, a spirit which acknowledges Jesus' authority as it is being cast out. Today it seems, at first, as though we are in for more of the same. Simon's mother-in-law is sufficiently healed to carry round the drinks tray, a useful sort of healing. Then follow more, multiple, healings. It looks as though Jesus is embarking on the career of a charismatic healer, something which would have cut a familiar figure in that time and place. Travelling faith healers were relatively common in that time and place and some of them were quite good at it.

However, to make it clear that Jesus is *not* just another travelling wonder-worker, our Gospel's third paragraph suddenly takes a different turn:

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶ And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷ When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." ³⁸ He answered, "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." ³⁹ And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

As the last sentence indicates, and as we know from our reading of the gospels, Jesus doesn't stop doing those things, but he puts them in context. Mark's Gospel, in particular, challenges us to look through the various layers of who Jesus *appears* to be and find the truth which sets us free. Mark frames the whole Gospel with two moments of recognition - at Jesus' baptism:

And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (1.11)

and at the cross:

Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (15.39)

It is the trajectory between those two points of *recognition* on which we find ourselves throughout Mark's gospel, and at a fairly early stage this morning.

In this morning's Gospel Jesus is having to think carefully about how what he *does* relates to who he *is*: what it will say about him; what will be remembered. He has begun to seem like one sort of person: he then repeatedly challenges the expectations this creates in those around him, until finally he is handed over and killed. And then he does it again - he rises from dead! We Christians, of all people, must always be on the lookout for the unexpected, and especially the unexpected *good*, in

situations and people. There, often, we find God. And this moment highlights, for Jesus and therefore for us, the vital importance of ‘thinking about things’ in the presence of God: he goes apart to pray.

The final scene in this morning’s Gospel confirms that Jesus is misunderstood even by Simon and the other disciples. Jesus seeks a deserted place and is literally ‘hunted down’, we are told, by them, with the demand that he return (‘Everyone is searching for you’). But Jesus does not return to Capernaum: he moves on to other towns in Galilee to resume his task of proclamation.

Why does Jesus reject the request for more miracles even when asked by those closest to him? There appear to be two reasons. First, Jesus rejects any response to him that focuses exclusively on miracles. While the miracles demonstrate power, and force questions about his identity, he knows that they do not themselves reveal the most important truth of who he is. Second, Jesus appears to reject the request because he understands his vocation to lie elsewhere:

He answered, "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.*" 1.38

However good and joyous it may be for him to heal large numbers of people, however popular it may make him, he understands that his real calling lies elsewhere. The miracles do not, in and of themselves, conflict with that vocation: the miracles don’t *contradict* who he is, but the uncomprehending response of people to miracles does lead to wrong conclusions about him. He recognizes a trap of populism: courting popularity is not ‘what he came to do’. Jesus subordinates healing and exorcism to the greater calling: announcing the kingdom of God. The kingdom was Jesus’ project: it was his big idea, that God is the true ruler of our lives, however the world looks to those who don’t attend to God. And he sharpens that focus after spending time ‘thinking about things’ in prayer.

We Christians are extremely fortunate: we share with all humanity our God-given ability to ‘think about things’; but we are also promised that *God is with us* in the thinking when we pray. Contemplation and quiet prayer are vital to our lives and our faith. Pandemic lockdowns have sometimes seemed to give us too much opportunity for introspection, but with Lent almost upon us, we will all benefit from setting aside time for thinking about things with God. As always, he will surprise us.