

Epiphany 5
8/2/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 40:21 - 31
Psalm 147
I Corinthians 9:16 – 23
Mark 1:29 - 39

He healed many dis-eases

Mark tells us Jesus came into Galilee preaching, teaching and casting out demons, and today he is at work healing the sick. The ancient world made no real distinction between the causes of sickness and the power of the demons, negative “bogeys” that irritate and influence our actions. Healers and magicians were plentiful, and practised freely, and there was never any question that the spirit world could be manipulated. In our scientific, medically oriented world, how are we to understand what is going on here? Is Jesus any different from other exorcists and healers? Was he a magician, or did his status as the Son of God make him better able to manipulate the laws of nature? To understand what happens here we do not have to sacrifice our understanding of science or medicine. Nor do we have to agree that Jesus challenged the laws of nature. What we can say is that the symbolic function of Jesus’ healing and exorcism is to show that the transcendent power at work in him is a power that lifts up, restores to community, and sets free for service. In other words it cures our dis-ease. Read through this lens the healing of Simon’s mother in law has the same symbolic function in the narrative as the drama created by the exorcism we heard about last week. It shows that in Jesus word and deed go together. Both are disruptive: both testify to who he is for us - the Holy One of God who lives and moves within a sovereignty that is unconstrained by the limits of human awareness and control. He embodies what it looks like when the life-giving energy of divine merciful love is released amongst us.

The first two stories in the reading from Mark deal with how popular Jesus became through his healing. In the third story he went off to pray. It is significant that when the disciples found him and challenged him to return to the healing ministry, he did not. Healing as such was not the real focus of his work. The ministry he was intent on was spreading the news of the nearness of the God’s presence so that people would turn and wait on God. Healing was a sign that accompanied his announcement of the presence of the reign of God.

It is noticeable that in the Uniting church congregational life is diminishing while agencies of care are expanding. We are an activist church. It is salutary to see that whatever activism Jesus engaged in, represented by exorcism and healing, went hand in hand with his preaching, and his intentional life of prayer. And if we read further into Mark we see that Jesus continued to wait on God, even in the bleakest of landscapes, Gethsemane and the cross. There he entered fully into our sickness: the dis-ease of our separation from God, in order to show us the way to life.

Mark reports popular interest in Jesus' work, but from the beginning his activities aroused hostility: from the demons who knew what power was at work in him, and from the authorities who later (3:1-6 and 3:22-30) publicly accused him over his healings and exorcisms. When Jesus began to give expression to the merciful love of God, those with a grip on power panicked because the assumed order of things was being challenged at a profound level beyond their control.

In geographical terms, Mark's stories in this section show Jesus moving away from the centre to the periphery. He went to the places where people were poor, on the outer or even dispossessed. From the days of the Desert mothers and fathers to the days of agencies like our own Frontier Services, this pattern lives on. And let's not forget, people live "on the periphery" in big cities like this, in suburbs like North Melbourne.

The church engaged with the periphery because it heard the call to go and restore the balance of life in the harsh places. In response it sought to embody what it knew of God: that people might receive and know the signs of grace and blessing.

In the early part of the last century an Anglican Brother was ministering near the NSW/QLD border. On one occasion he came upon a shed out in the wilderness where he encountered a surly taciturn settler. The Brother was eventually able to make it clear who he was and what he represented. At once the man's attitude changed. He took the Brother inside to meet his wife who was nursing a desperately sick child. The mother said she had been praying all day for a minister to Baptise her child before he died. The Brother Baptised the child, laid hands on him and offered prayers for healing, and went on his way. The next day as he passed that place the child was outside playing under a tree.

Was there a healing here? Yes! Life and peace replaced many forms of dis-ease. Was the blessing of God present? Yes! Despair turned into hope in steadfast love. Is this some sort of magic, or twisting of the laws of nature? We don't think so! This was an experience of the Word and Sacraments in action, embodied in one who lived by the Gospel, and who represented the healing, restoring presence of the church in a tough environment.

It is said that magic and mysticism represent opposite poles in the expression of transcendence. Magic works on the basis of secret knowledge, and its aim is to gain something for the one who is in the know. Concern for power and self-promotion are central here. Mysticism is based on an encounter with the divine that is not immediately clear, but it is characterised by kenosis: self-giving, born of a relationship with the merciful love of God. The root of mysticism is in self-giving rather than power. It offers something rather than takes. Jesus was not a magician. He lived in the power of self-giving love and we, his people, are called to do no less. God give us that strength.
