

Year B Epiphany 5

Church of the Holy Spirit. Gorokan

February 5th 2012

Mark 1:29-39

My favourite time of the day is the very early morning. For many years now I have been getting up around 5am and then walking in the silence of that time. I do this for a couple of reasons. Firstly – and simply – just for exercise – it's good for my physical health. I do it to clear my mind before the start of day, and the busyness which often ensues – it's good for my mental health. I do it, also, to spend quiet time in the presence of God – it's good for my spiritual health.

I can relate, really well, to do this passage from Mark's gospel and Jesus' journey to a 'deserted place'. It is the day after Mark's portrayal of a typical day in the life of Jesus. The day before had been filled with three different ministry activities of Jesus – he had taught with authority in the synagogue; he had confronted the powers of darkness raging within a demon-possessed man; he had healed all who had come to him.

Teaching – exorcising – healing: all of these are central to Jesus' understanding of the ministry which makes God's kingdom of justice and peace present. Teaching – exorcising – healing: all of these must be central to the ministry of Jesus' disciples.

Each of these activities, in their own ways, speak of God's kingdom as a place of life in abundance, where all people know God, where there is no darkness only marvellous light, where all people are made whole and are reconciled to God and to one another. This is what Jesus has come to share with the people of his time and the people of all times and places.

Central, also to his mission and ministry is the call for disciples to be drawn to Jesus in order that they would call other disciples to Jesus. I have spoken repeatedly about this in recent months since my return from the United States. All of us gathered here are challenged to accept the responsibilities of being members of the Body of Christ. This is no comfortable social club we have been

called to – it is the very body of disciples of the one, true God of all things created and beyond creation. Perhaps this is the most pressing challenge facing the Church in this day and age – for us to actually believe that and then act on it.

Mike Breen, one of the leaders of the Missional Communities movement, says that, “If our mission is to make disciples, the church will grow. If our mission is to make the church, then disciples are rarely made”. In other words, focus on discipleship and the rest will take care of itself. Spend too much time rearranging the church in order to do mission and that – mission – will be the last thing which will happen, if it happens at all.

Buried in the middle of this gospel passage today is the story of Simon’s mother-in-law. Putting all the mother-in-law jokes aside, this little episode, so easy to miss, is vital example of discipleship in action. Jesus and the others have returned from the synagogue. On entering Simon’s house they discover that his mother-in-law is sick with a fever. It’s still the Sabbath – don’t forget the rules to be followed regarding no work. Yet, Jesus goes to her, raises her up and, immediately, she begins to serve them. End of story. Or so it seems.

Go back and look at the details again. This is the first healing in the gospel. It displays the third priority of Jesus’ mission – making people ‘whole’. Later, we will hear of the whole town coming for healing. Already the first disciples have faith in Jesus – “They told him about her at once”. Already they are beginning to recognise something in this Jesus. People who are willing to be disciples recognise the presence of God. He goes to her, takes her by the hand and lifts her up. The kingdom of God is about raising people up to fullness of life, life in abundance. The evidence? The fever, in this case, leaves her immediately.

Don’t get confused about the next part of the story. This woman hasn’t been healed because there was no-one else to get the meal ready. No, she encounters Jesus, is healed and, then, is compelled by this event to serve the Messiah. She is yet another of the early disciples immediately responding to the presence of God in Jesus. She serves as an example, across two thousand years of history, of how we are to respond to Jesus.

The kingdom of God is right here, among us. Jesus has come into our lives with the good news of the kingdom. Jesus lifts us up from the strains and pains of

our lives. We, too, have the opportunity to respond as this woman responds – to immediately serve the Messiah as disciples, ones who are willing to learn and to help others to learn of God’s love for them.

Not only are we to profess with our lips that we are disciples, members of the Body of Christ. We are called to live out, with every fibre of our being, our willingness to follow where Jesus leads the way, to trust and believe in the good news. The heart of discipleship lies in those choices.

And so, we come back to the deserted place, with Jesus praying. Simon and the others go hunting – a very strong word – for him. They are yet to see beyond the wonders of the day before. They will come to know that it’s not about the teaching, or the exorcising or the healing – important as these things are. It is about God. It is about God’s kingdom. It is about God’s plans for humanity.

In the busyness of our daily lives, in the busyness of the ministries here, all of us need to be reminded of those things. It is about God. It is about God’s kingdom. It is about God’s plans for humanity.

Jesus needs faithful disciples just as much today as he did when he walked the earth. People who are willing to commit themselves to the things Jesus was committed to: people who are open to learning of God and helping others to learn of God; people who will confront the darkness in their own lives and in the world around them; people who will seek healing and reconciliation and who will offer healing and reconciliation to others.

These words of good news are for us. They demand a response – not a lukewarm, “maybe” – but a total commitment to rise up and serve Jesus. So, what will it be?

Canon Hugh Bright

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