



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

The lift that only love can bring

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Mark 1:29-39

29 As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. **30** Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they immediately told Jesus about her. **31** So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them. **32** That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. **33** The whole town gathered at the door, **34** and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was. **35** Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. **36** Simon and his companions went to look for him, **37** and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" **38** Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else--to the nearby villages--so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." **39** So he travelled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

At the beginning of a New Year, I am looking at the early part of Mark's Gospel. I reminded our congregation last Sunday that Mark tells his account of the gospel in this first chapter in such a way as to see the ministry of Jesus as inviting us to be part of his kingdom. Although there are three progressively structured passages that are about location, they are much more about mission.

- Jesus is in the synagogue—religion (1:21-28)
- Jesus journeys through the home—personal (1:29-34)
- Jesus engages with community—public (1:35-37)

These short cameos are helpful as they give us insight into the nature of the ministry that will follow. When we go to the cinema, we are often given 'shorts' of films that will soon be showing. It is interesting how often my decisions about whether to see a film or not are influenced by a two-minute trailer.

The early chapters of Mark are far more powerful than merely trailers, for they help us to appreciate the nature of what God has done and is doing in Jesus Christ. What we see here will be expanded throughout his ministry.

I turn to the healing of Simon's mother-in-law who was in bed with a fever and this opens up a further perspective on Jesus' authority. We also have an outline of the priorities of Jesus' mission; a developing portrait, which is painted for us here in the context of him arising early in the morning to find a place to be alone and at prayer. What begins in the synagogue and home will become a pattern throughout the whole region of the Galilee.

We read these words in the context of a new year and all the challenges that lie before us at Wesley Mission.

The Danish Christian philosopher, Kierkegaard, suggested that each of us is born "with sealed orders". He was suggesting that each of us is here with a purpose, some direction that God has in mind for us ... in our short lives.

But that purpose, that direction, is not self-evident to us. We must live close to God, give ourselves to a mission in which we may naturally feel inclined to engage – and, as we are attentive to the Holy Spirit, we will discover in God’s time what lies within our “sealed orders”.

What is true at an individual level is also true as a community, as we seek to discern what it is that God is calling us to do and to be.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, although not a beneficiary of any historical-critical method of biblical interpretation, took scripture very seriously. He tended not to ask about historical precedents or the context in which a passage might have been written. But he did ask one question which always related to the world in front of the text. By doing so, he asked, “What has this scripture to say to the mission of which I am a part?”

I consider that approach still has some merit, as we see all scripture as an invitation to change. It is in this light that I draw your attention to what Jesus had to say not only in the context of the New Testament, but also in terms of what we are about in his mission today. I wonder what lies before us in this New Testament scripture.

At an early point in my ministry, I had a very large congregation and was faced with the dilemma of wanting to know what should be both my priority and that of the church.

To that end, I produced a modest document which enquired of our people what they were seeking for the church. One of the responses simply had on it the words, “I want a lift!”

At one level, you could describe such a response as being shallow – for it appears to focus upon personal needs and doesn’t really address the issues of learning or engaging in the struggle to make the Christian faith real in the contemporary setting. However, I have considered those words on a number of occasions and suggest that there is a good deal of truth in the fact that both individuals and our community are in need of a lift – something which raises us:

- above our negative experiences
- out of our insularity and narrowness
- out of a cycle which sees no real hope or purpose

We can understand this on an individual level, but we also see it on a far greater scale:-

Just prior to arriving in Australia, I had one of those experiences which leave us feeling helpless. In July of 2005, a series of bombings took place in London. Our youngest son works in the city of London and travelled regularly on a tube and bus journey which took in a route that was hit by those terrorist bombs.

I had a meeting with the Anglican Bishops in the North-West that very morning and it was only as I left the meeting that I became fully aware of the extent of the devastation and loss of life. I did what you might expect – I tried to make contact with my telephone. I was told that all service in the city of London had been suspended. You can imagine the relief when, two hours later, I received a text to say all was well, though a colleague of our son was seriously hurt.

I thought of this experience when I was in London recently. In nearby Paris, terrorism was manifest in a terrible way and the city was in lock-down as a hunt took place for the perpetrators of such violence. There are few countries in the world where those living in large cities escape the experience of living in fear – and we encountered a small but significant instance on our own doorstep in December.

The fear of economic uncertainty is demonstrated in cities where people's lives are dominated by the price of homes and property. At the same time, we recognise that cheek by jowl there are those who really have no possibility of ever owning their own home – and worry about the ability to meet next week's grocery bill.

The Christian community is certainly in need of a lift, when day-by-day we see the marginalisation of religion and its effects upon Christian communities in particular. We need to rediscover the power of the local Christian community, whether it be in Rome, Corinth, Colossae, Bondi, Manly or Liverpool.

As we return to the detail in Mark's Gospel, we remind ourselves that the author's purpose was to underline the God-given authority of Jesus Christ in the quite specific challenging incidents that Jesus faced.

What shines through from Mark's Gospel is the undeniable authority of Jesus. The author is at pains to make clear that there is no elaborate ritual involved, yet at his powerful command, as we have seen in the earlier passage, even the appearance of evil is confronted.

The healing of Simon's mother-in-law does a number of things which bring us the encouragement that only love can offer:

- It demonstrates his authority over disease and all that this represents in denying wholeness
- It makes it clear that the call to follow, which is fresh in the disciples' minds, cannot be exercised without regard for people in their need
- The activity of God in Christ always seemed to create a curiosity and in this context the audience is drawn to look for him, even in the early hours of the morning when it was still dark

Our text shows us how Jesus dealt with this woman who was laid low with a fever:

Mark 1:31

"So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them."

Let us allow this verse to demonstrate not only the activity of Jesus, but also the pattern for all that we do as his people today.

HE WENT TO HER – AN IDENTIFICATION WITH NEED

It is worthy of note that Jesus is closely accompanied by his disciples in these early chapters, made clear in verses 21 and 29. There are occasions when it is difficult to distinguish just who is actually present, but what we see here is that Jesus is the One who goes to the person in need and his action speaks of identification with her.

We are not told the nature of this woman's fever, but we can be certain it was far more than a 'hot flush'. In one rabbinic tradition, healing someone with a fever was considered to be of immense importance. Jesus' willingness to reach out to her was a statement of how he would always be reaching out to those in need.

Max DePree was the son of the founder of a furniture empire, particularly in relation to the development of the modern office. Later in life he became an early advocate of leadership and he gets to the heart of things with this succinct formulation, "The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality."

We live in a world where we are all too aware that the way the world is understood is at times confused. We allow the mission and purpose of the Christian faith to give definition and meaning to our lives.

One of the realities of today is that it is a world that is saturated in need. We see it in terms of hunger and poverty around the globe and such needs are brought into our living rooms to observe. But we also see it manifest in our own country. Far too many are struggling to find a home and the lives of children and families are marred by domestic violence – and the list could go on.

When I was a prison chaplain, I was always touched by some of those initial encounters with men who were prisoners for the first time and had reached our prison after sentencing. Their eyes told a story of fear, shame and loneliness, such as I had never met before. Identifying with people in need is essential.

When Jesus went to this person in need, a number of things are true:

- Her illness prevented her from doing what she was eager to do
- Her illness affects not only herself, but also her whole family
- Her illness is not the final act of this drama

The compassionate action of Jesus Christ and the call to each one of us is to identify with people in their need. This evening as we meet together, we represent such a wide range of activity which finds its greatest purpose as it touches the lives of people in need.

The Christian faith undergirds our lives and helps us to get a handle on real priorities. One of the people that I met as a young person, whose conversation was enormously stimulating, was Sir David Frost. David, who died suddenly on a cruise ship last year, was the son of one of our Methodist ministers, Rev Paradine Frost, for whom he had great respect and affection.

When Paradine died, David took special care of his mother Mona and he tells the endearing story of how he flew his mother across the Atlantic for a dinner at the White House. Mona, who in retirement was a faithful member of her local Methodist church in Suffolk, was sitting next to President Clinton and she said to him, “You realise that I have had to give up choir practice to be here tonight!” It does put all that we do into perspective.

HE TOOK HER HAND – WHICH IS ONLY POSSIBLE ALONGSIDE PEOPLE

Nowhere in this passage is there a greater indication of the nature of the gospel and of service than in the fact that Jesus took her hand. This vital contact speaks volumes and will be replicated many times throughout his ministry. The power of touch demonstrates something very deep.

The healing moment is starkly different from the earlier incident in the synagogue. When Jesus retires from public view, he comes into a fresh area of need and he takes the hand of Simon’s mother-in-law. It is clear that relationships are key to healing.

The importance of relationship is of course critical in all leadership – and, like all of us, I am aware of how it can so easily slip.

One of my favourite stories is of the young officer, not very long out of military training, who discovered he had no change when he was about to purchase a can from the soft drink machine. He flagged down a passing private and asked him, “Do you have change for a dollar?” The private said cheerfully, “I think so, let me take a look.”

The young officer drew himself up stiffly and said, "Soldier, that is no way to address an officer. We'll start all over again. Do you have any change for a dollar?" The private came to attention immediately, saluted smartly, and said, "No, sir!"

We always catch more flies with sugar than vinegar – and the warmth and graciousness of Jesus Christ becomes so powerful in bringing out the possibility of a new beginning.

The accessibility of Jesus Christ is demonstrated in the latter section, where the crowds are seeking him. For me, it is one of the most beautiful and moving of scenes in the whole gospel. It must have made people ask their own questions:

- Perhaps he can bring healing to my mother
- Perhaps he can give sight to my boy
- Perhaps my own life can be radically changed.

We see a village community scene move into the intimacy of a home, but now into a vaster context of human need.

HE LIFTED HER UP – THE INCENTIVE THAT WILL CHANGE HER FOREVER

The raising of a person in need is the greatest lift that anyone could experience. When I reflect upon it, I think of the families, the older people, the homeless and those whose lives are wracked with debt, guilt or hurt of many kinds.

Within my unique ministry here at Wesley Mission, I have missed the opportunity of conducting weddings. As a pastor in a large church for many years, I used to conduct a large number and one of the joys is to help the couple feel relaxed at this most important moment of their lives. However, I didn't use the advice that one minister used to give to brides for their entry into the church on their wedding day.

His advice was that they should think of three priorities and tick them off in their minds: firstly, as they come down the aisle, they must run through their minds the word 'aisle' until they reached about two-thirds of the way – and then his advice was to focus on the altar and to allow the word 'altar' to run through the mind – and finally, as she reached the front of the church with her father, to look at her groom and concentrate on 'him'. On one occasion, a bride-to-be took this advice very seriously and was heard to be saying, as she reached the front of the church, "Aisle, altar, him."

Such repetition is not really healthy, but it is true that love does change us. We find ourselves transformed by each other and, through the call of Jesus Christ, we are able to speak hope to each other.

When God takes hold of our lives, we are brought into a new place of healing and wholeness, which is transforming.

In his penetrating book, *The First Circle*, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, the renowned Russian author who defected, makes an interesting observation about how the Russian authorities in those days were handling the church.

He writes: "No-one stops them from ringing their bells; they can break communion bread any way they please. They can have their processions with the cross. But they will in no way allow them to have any connection with social or civic affairs." In the writer's mind, the Christian Church was allowed to go through the motions; it could have a presence, but it dare not have an influence.

There is a cost to reaching out to folks in need and that is felt most keenly in a place where the Christian faith is deemed to be an anachronism of the past.

We remind ourselves that Jesus brings a lift which only love can bring.

As we begin a new year, let's take the challenge of offering hope and love to our community and help to raise people's lives as we identify with need, coming alongside them and knowing that God can and will truly change people's lives and situations.

One evening just before the great Broadway musical star, Mary Martin, was to go on stage in *South Pacific*, a note was handed to her. It was from Oscar Hammerstein, who at that moment was on his deathbed. The short note simply said:

"Dear Mary, A bell's not a bell till you ring it. A song's not a song till you sing it. Love in your heart is not put there to stay. Love isn't love till you give it away."