



Staff Dedication Service: More than a celebrity

Mark 1:29-39

At the beginning of a New Year, like so many Christians, I will be focusing on Mark's Gospel. There is much to be found in Mark's account which tells of the ministry of Jesus in a considered, direct manner. This afternoon we focus on Mark 1:29-39. I hope it will have something specific to say at this staff dedication service.

In this section, Mark is typically swift in his presentation and appears to conjoin four separate episodes. Already we have been given insight into Jesus' preaching, healing and so much more. But when we reach this section, we face the fact that Jesus is becoming very popular, rather like a celebrity, demonstrated by the fact that we are told when the disciples found Jesus, they exclaimed, "Everyone is looking for you!" (v.37). An experience many desire—until they have it!

I use this part of Mark's Gospel as a marker which we put down in relation to our work at the beginning of the year.

Writers on leadership often talk about mastering skills, observing successful people and so on. I think we can discern a good deal of what is needed in our leadership and work from Jesus Christ. Jesus understood these matters long before there was any professional management training. His life resonates with so many of the skills that we know we need to harness if we are to be serious about offering leadership at Wesley Mission and beyond in the wider community.

There is a German proverb which says so much, "What's the use of running if you are not on the right road?"

We need to be moving in the right direction. In the last few years, I sense our purpose has gained greater clarity with regard to our strategic direction. It is in that context that we seek to step up a gear. We have only just begun.

Jesus is on the road, travelling from place to place and going head to head with those people who did not share the purposes of his ministry and seek to deflect and oppose him. Yet, everywhere Jesus goes, his popularity seems to be growing, especially with what we might call "the common people".

We may well ask ourselves what Jesus' response is to such recognition, or even adulation. These verses in the first chapter of Mark give us an indication, but do so much more—because they give us insight into what motivated Jesus Christ and what should motivate us if we are seeking that our words and deeds should be in tune with the ministry of Jesus.

They also warn us not to be taken in by popularity, notoriety or those things which mark out many in our community life. Recently a young eighteen year old has been identified as the new Shane Warne. A terribly bold pathway to seek to walk, to say the least. We hope he does – on the cricket field! We follow One whose ministry was filled with compassionate care. He is our model and mentor.

There are even some aspects of training courses for organisations and individuals which talk about the perception they want to project about themselves. We at Wesley Mission have chosen to "continue the work of Jesus Christ in Word and deed". In effect, we are saying that what is true in relation to him must be true for us!



Leading and caring for people

“as soon as they left the synagogue, they went ...”

We reflect upon what has already happened in the synagogue, which is just across the road from the home of Simon’s family. Here we discover Jesus healing Simon’s mother-in-law of a fever – and also the crowds gathered at the door to seek help from him.

The healing of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law (v.v. 29-31) is an example of the spread of the power of the kingdom. There is noticeable reserve about how the incident is recorded, but it has a degree of intimate detail as Jesus raises her up and holds her hand. Also significant is that following the healing, she got up and served them. Here is a main feature of the gospel—that compassion towards others often enables a response from those we help.

As most of us now know, we have set ourselves some stretching goals in reaching those “most in need”. A large number of those to whom we offer care could be described in this way. Our challenge is to determine what “most in need” means. A simple and yet powerful way of asking this question and answering it is to say – what would be the case if we were not there. For me, it is a question for the whole community sector.

We must have an appropriately curious suspicion of success, fame and popularity, if it does not lead to outcomes which best serve the kingdom of God.

- Outcomes which are tangible in specific settings
- Outcomes which are measurable
- Outcomes which are applicable to real need

Rory Noland, director of Heart of the Artist ministries, in a piece written in 1999, said on the theme of fame and popularity, “I’ve come to the conclusion that I would rather labour in obscurity for God than be famous for doing something insignificant with my life.”

The thought raises a host of issues, but it does remind me of our key concern to offer compassionate care. It is not just what we do, but how we do it.

Defining culture by actions

“so he went to her, took her hand and helped her up.”

These short verses are crowded with examples of how Jesus Christ’s ministry was extremely practical. In addition to relieving Simon’s wife’s mother of her fever, he responded to those who were reaching out to him. News was clearly spreading very quickly.

There is a pattern in Jesus’ healing ministry demonstrated toward one who was close family for Simon Peter. Let us simply open up the description by Mark and ask what it has to say to us:-

“so he went to her ...” – this was a journey that took him away from public view. We must be prepared to go where people are. Some of the most meaningful aspects of our work are evident when members of our team just go out of their way to reach people. When I visit our centres and talk with our people or receive letters from folks who have been helped, I note a recurring theme—that a feature of our work is how staff and volunteers just reach out to help others and often in ways that go far beyond what could be said to be reasonably expected.



“took her hand ...” – the intimacy of Mark’s account communicates something very helpful. We could suggest that Jesus knew her, but I am sure what we see is not just that the Lord’s identity with her is of just knowing, but of understanding her parlous situation. What does it mean to take a person’s hand in the wider context of our work? It is far more than a symbol of pastoral care:-

- Holding the hands of those destroyed by debt
- Holding the hands of those whose future is uncertain with regard to housing
- Holding the hands of those whose lives have been ruined by alcohol and gambling
- Holding the hands of those whose lives are isolated and very much alone. Aloneness remains a major problem in a city when people are to be found “a-plenty”!

In a matter of seven days in January, we experienced two very different climates—one with -7 degrees C and the other +36 degrees C. It is interesting then that some of the same questions were being asked in both settings: “Do you think these people who are homeless want to be homeless?”

- I have not met many who want to be homeless
- I do know, however, that the alternatives are often those which do not breathe hope for those in need.

In the Markan account of Peter’s mother-in-law, it is in the context of a home and friends. As we turn the pages of the gospel, we find so many outside homes or on the edge of the crowd.

Making strategic decisions

“very early in the morning” and “let us go somewhere else”.

We may well conclude that Jesus fears that the crowd and those that were pressing him were mistaken about his mission and this would lead to them further misunderstanding his Messiahship. When we examine the gospel and history, we conclude that misunderstanding is as big a challenge as opposition for Jesus Christ and his followers.

Following the early section in Mark, the crowd may well be hankering after Jesus, considering him to be some kind of miracle-worker, and this leads to him becoming very much a celebrity. The concept of celebrity has become very attractive, so much so that they might even hanker for a trip to the jungle! Though apparently it doesn’t improve your chances of a renewed tennis career.

The remarkable Danish Christian philosopher, Soren Kirkegaard, said that Christ came seeking followers and got a few dedicated disciples, but many more admirers. Admirers appreciate a person, but they generally don’t follow a person. They don’t sacrifice for a person, they don’t work for a person. Admiration doesn’t cost that much, if anything!

In the first chapter, Jesus had called the disciples to follow him. Will Willimon made the point that the gospel does not say that Jesus asked people “step back and think about me” or “thoughtfully consider me”. He said “follow me”. There is all the difference in the world between being an onlooker and being a disciple.

In the first chapter of the gospel, we see that Jesus’ ministry appears to be growing very quickly. This growth was so great that Jesus himself had to make plans as to what he should do next.

In these words, Jesus establishes his priorities which involved praying, preaching and being prepared to have a strategic direction in all that he did. He was prepared to meet the crowd at the door after



sunset, to leave early in the morning for solitude and to set off to nearby villages to continue his ministry.

One writer, commenting on what he describes as a double-story, suggests that what we meet is not dissimilar to the dilemmas of our day:

- Jesus was effective because he responded to the felt needs of the crowds
- But it was not all that he did – as he also sought solitude

We have an insatiable focus upon relevance today. This is an age that seeks instant solutions. Politicians and leaders of all kinds are expected to solve problems of the most complex kind in a three minute television interview—and they in turn seek a brief that will help them to be “relevant”.

Don English’s comment is so true, “Forsake the truth, and the search for relevance becomes a journey without maps or compass, ending in a wilderness which destroys.”

In the final verses of the section (v.v.38-39) we find Jesus walking ahead, leading the way and giving direction to the disciples.

Jesus does not suggest for a moment that miraculous healings have nothing to do with his mission; indeed many would become followers as a result of this aspect of his ministry. But he is implying, by his actions, that they are not the main thing.

As I consider the ministry of Jesus, it becomes abundantly clear to me that he had a real handle on vision—and was prepared to lead others to a better place.

In the twentieth century, one of the great visionaries was Walt Disney. One of his most significant steps was not the creation of the first sound cartoon or animated feature-length motion picture, but something that came from an unexpected place.

I found the film “Saving Mr Banks” with its London and Australian links, to be most helpful in giving us some understanding of Disney.

When I talk about one of his greatest steps, I am referring to his vision for Disneyland and how this developed. When Walt’s two daughters were young, he took them to an amusement park in Los Angeles. The children so enjoyed it that they regularly went there on Saturday mornings.

Walt was especially captivated by the carousel. As he approached it, he saw a blur of bright images racing around to very energetic music. As he moved closer, he could see that his eye had been fooled. He observed shabby horses with cracked and chipped paint and he noticed that only the horses on the outside moved up and down. The others stood lifeless, bolted to the floor.

The cartoonist’s disappointment inspired him to a grand vision. In his mind’s eye he could see an amusement park where the illusion didn’t evaporate and where children and adults alike could enjoy the carnival atmosphere. Larry Taylor stated, in *Be an Orange*, that Walt Disney’s vision could be summarised as “No chipped paint. All the horses jump.”

So as we talk about vision, as inevitably we do, we recognise that it is indispensable and we see that Jesus himself had a clear sense of vision and purpose. True vision is far-reaching. It goes beyond the moment.



On this formal beginning of a new year, we remind ourselves that we are given the privilege of a vision. As long as we stay close to that vision, transact our business and mission on that line and keep a focus on Christ, then the future is secure.

At the beginning of a new year, we can:

- be filled with regret about the past and look back
- have reason for concern about the numerous challenges of the present
- choose a vision which calls us on to a future with Jesus Christ.

When I look at the work of Wesley Mission, I ask myself what is it that Jesus Christ is looking for. Sympathisers? Cheerleaders? I believe it is something more—and that is followers whose lives are bound up in the call of the One who called women and men to the distinctive Christian way and those of us who live close to Word and deed are privileged to live closest to the Jesus way.

Tory Evans, in *God is up to something great*, put it so well, “God has your tomorrow covered even if you haven’t been there yet.”