

Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> February, 2021 - 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany - Year B

Isaiah 40:21-31  
Psalm 147:1-11  
1 Corinthians 9:16-23  
Mark 1:29-39

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

I think it was Mark Twain who once said “there are two kinds of people in the world, people who classify the world into two kinds of people, and people who don't.”

I have also heard this questionable bit of wisdom - "there are three kinds of people in the world: people who can do maths, and people who can't." Now you might wonder whether this has anything to do with anything. Well, what I want to offer to you today is this - “there are 2 kinds of people in the world - people who are in need, and people who know that they are in need.”

That is to say, I believe we are all in need, and today's Gospel should be very, very good news to we who are in such need.

Why?

Well, on the surface, this morning's Gospel is an apparently very simple account of Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law and her response to this healing. The key for us lies in just how much of the action in this passage is in fact indicative of deeper themes, which pervade Mark's Gospel as a whole.

Many of you will remember your primary school education in the English language, I am sure. Well, in case you don't, let me refresh your memory. What is a noun?

A noun is a person, place, or thing - a naming word. And what is a verb? A verb is an action word; a doing word.

Within our passage today are 2 verbs - 2 doing words which are key to our understanding of the passage itself, and of the Gospel in general.

The first verb is something that Jesus does. In his action of healing Simon's Mother-in-Law, he takes her by the hand and raises her up. Mark uses the Greek verb *egeiro*, which he uses for some, but not all of Jesus' healing miracles. But most significantly it is the same verb which is used to describe what Jesus does on Easter Day - it is about resurrection. The word suggests that new strength is imparted to those laid low by illness, unclean spirits, or even death, so that they may again rise up to take their place in the world.

It is not in question that Simon's mother-in-law was in need. Indeed, it is clear that she is physically unwell, and needed healing from that specific illness. But it is more than just that.

Illness in those days (and indeed, today) bore a heavy social cost: not only would a person be unable to earn a living or contribute to the well-being of a household, but their ability to take their proper role in the community, to be honored as a valuable member of a household, town, or village, would be taken from them by illness. Peter's mother-in-law is an excellent case in point. It was her calling and her honor to show hospitality to guests in her home.

Cut off from that role by an illness, cut her off from doing that which integrated her into her world. Who was she when no longer able to engage in her calling? Jesus restored her to her social world and brought her back to a life of value by freeing her from that fever.

It is very important to see that healing is about restoration to community and restoration of a calling, a role as well as restoration to life. For life without community and calling is bleak indeed.

Jesus' ministry involves restoration of those cut off from community to a full role in the community. Those who have been seriously ill in our own time will understand the joy of simply being back as a participant in the "ordinary" processes of community life. Truly, there is nothing ordinary about life in community. Jesus wields the power of God Almighty to bring about participation: it is God's will for creation to be serving in community with others.

So, that's the first key word in the passage - *egeiro*; raised up. That's where the second interesting verb comes into play.

Simon Peter's mother-in-law "served" immediately after having been raised. The verb is *diakoneo*, the same verb Jesus uses to describe the essence of his own ministry in Mark's later chapters. It is "to serve" rather than "to be served" that characterizes Christ. It is also "to serve" that characterizes his disciples. Simon Peter's mother-in-law is far from being an exemplar of an un-liberated woman for whom serving men is her whole life. Rather she is the first character in Mark's gospel who exemplifies true discipleship.

Just for your interest, it will be women who, in chapter 15, are described as having served Jesus. This is not a verb used of Jesus' male disciples who famously do not quite "get it" within the gospel itself.

Those who are on the ball will recognize this verb of service, *diakoneo*, as also being the root of the word Deacon.

Archbishop Ian George used to be very fond of reminding me (and others) that even as priest, bishop, and even Archbishop, the most important part of ordained ministry is the role of the Deacon - as a priest you never cease to be a Deacon; service - self-giving, sacrificial service is what marks diaconal ministry, and this flows through to all other orders of ordained ministry.

Those who are ordained as Deacons typically serve in more diverse ministry fields than people imagine. Some will be in parish ministry; some will serve in schools; others will serve in prison ministry; one of my friends in Melbourne recently became the Chaplain to the State Emergency Service (the SES).

But they all have one thing in common. Their calling is to bring the liberating news of the Gospel, that people whom they touch in their words and by their actions, might understand what it is to be restored to community, to have offered to them the healing and restorative message of hope and peace.

In the coming season of Lent we will be particularly asked to consider our own lives, our own journeys, and the ways in which we are in need. Remember - there are 2 types of people... those who are in need, and those who know they they are in need.

Let us seek to bring our dark places; those places in us over which we feel we have little control to God. Let us open them to his light and to his life. And may God who has control over even the powers of darkness, grant us resurrection (*egeiro*), and new life.

Amen