

## Sermon for 7 February 2021 on Mark 1: 29-39 (Caroline Seaton)

May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

Well, do we dare hope that an end to this pandemic is in sight with the rolling out of the vaccines? Some of you I know have received the 2 doses, others 1 dose and some waiting for that call which offers some comfort in this current climate. Others of us must wait a bit longer – I used to love being a bit younger than many of my friends but in this instance I'm not quite so smug!! But we still have to remember hand, face, space and for many more months, I fear.

And I'm sure we have passed the time doing things we would otherwise not have done, if we have not been working – jigsaws! Knitting, painting, decorating, watching films, walking, and reading those books we never have had time to look at other than the first few pages. And television has been a great comfort for many who have been self-isolating - for company, for comfort, for amusement and some intellectual stimulus. Vera, Call the midwife, the Andrew Marr Show but for me it's Casualty.

Casualty, for those not familiar, is a British medical drama on BBC One. Not only do you get the drama of unfortunate accidents, but you also get the physical treatment of the injuries and quite often the healing of relationships in estranged families. It is action packed and powerful. If only problems in our lives were so simply fixed within an hour! Though I wouldn't like to be a patient there as quite often following their discharge they are recalled due to some other hidden ailment!! The power of screen writers to produce story lines which hold our attention, I find marvellous.

The Gospel of Mark is an action-packed account of the life of Jesus. The whole Gospel tells of the ministry of Jesus from his baptism by John the Baptist to his death and burial and the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb. But unlike the other gospels, there is no miraculous birth or doctrine of divine pre-existence, nor, in the original ending (Mark 16:1-8), any post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. But this gospel nevertheless portrays Jesus as a heroic man of action, an exorcist, a healer, and a miracle worker. In this gospel the first 13 chapters of the 16 in total, are all about his miraculous works and it's only in the final few verses of Ch 16 verses 9-14 that we are given a brief account of events covered in other Gospels - his appearances to Mary and 2 of the two disciples following his resurrection, the commissioning of the disciples, and 2 verses only on his ascension.

As with Casualty and its story lines, in this gospel reading we hear about Jesus and his healing ministry. A healing ministry which none the like had seen before. And this extraordinary power threatened those in authority – they could not understand it. Who was this person doing all these acts? He threatened the stability of the country, caused people to follow him in masses and was generally a disruptive figure which they couldn't contain.

But the 2 strands of this reading I want to pick up on are the reference to demons and of course healing. Last week our gospel reading was the few verses prior to today's verses, where Jane spoke about the authority of Jesus and his authority to heal people. Today's is another account of healing – the account of Jesus healing Simon's mother-in law, plus many more people.

Jesus goes to the home of one of his followers - Simon, where his mother is lying in bed with a fever. In front of the assembled crowd, he takes her hand, and she is immediately healed. She gets up and serves them, proving that she is better and able to carry on her duties within the home. Indeed, a miraculous event which brought attention to his presence. In those days people thought illness was often related to demonic causes, which of course today we know is not the case. It was easier to blame 'something'. People were under the influence of the rulers of the time who had little time for anything they didn't understand.

'And he also cured many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons.....;'

He had the authority and power of his Father to do this, and this is what no one at the time understood – not even his disciples fully understood. And the end of that sentence 'and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they know him' is quite puzzling. I have often wondered how the demons knew who Jesus was, and the disciples didn't.

Well, demons are angels fallen from grace, so these demons would have known who Jesus was, coming from the same heavenly place as he had come from.

We hear in revelation ch 12 v9 "And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him." Another passage can be found in Matthew 25:41. Jesus teaches, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Those with the devil are called his 'angels' - the same beings called demons or evil spirits in other passages in the Bible.

Just as God's angels are sent to praise Him and aid believers, Satan and his demons are bent on the damaging of God's name in the earth and the destruction and deception of all those who love and serve Him (1 Peter 5:8; 2 Corinthians 4:4, 11:14-15). And we hear more in Mathew 10: v1 where the Bible calls demons "evil spirits" and "unclean" and asserts that they are indeed the angels of Satan (Revelation 12:9). Satan and his demons also attack Christians which is seen in 2 Corinthians 12:7; and do battle with the holy angels (Revelation 12:4-9) as mentioned above.

But going back to the text and the healing of many people: Jesus had the authority and power to heal people. And this he shared with his chosen followers. But it's not until after his death that we hear how he shared this power he had. In Ch 16 of this Gospel we hear in a few brief lines where Jesus commissions the disciples.

"Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.'"

And in Matthew Ch 28 - "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, as you go, disciple people in all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. And remember, I am with you each and every day until the end of the age."

During his lifetime Jesus never proclaimed he was the Messiah until after his resurrection – it was people who claimed he was the long expected one. And Jesus knowing the minds of the people around him, knew if he said he was the Messiah – it would play right into the hands of those in authority and advance his death before his work on earth was done. He kept his messianic nature secret for this very reason.

Healing is something we tend to think of as a medical process, but we know that healing in Christ is so much more than that. And it's our commissioning as his disciples today to help people understand that. Our purpose as a Christian is to be with people, walk with people in their time of distress, rejoice with people in times of delight. We are here to pray with, and for, people who need healing, whether in body mind or spirit. And it can be in the simple things of life that have the most profound and meaningful impact. Of course, developing a vaccine to fight the Coronavirus is so vitally important, but just by being there for people in their time of need, listening to them and giving them an encouraging word, can help bring so much healing. And this is our calling. And particularly at this time, a phone call to someone living alone or ill, or a socially distanced chat through a window, can bring people such hope and comfort. This might not seem enough, and indeed it might not cure them from whatever physical or mental suffering they are experiencing. But it shows God is with them offering hope, peace, and healing of spirits which have been eroded away. And the power of healing prayer is evident today as we see some people coming through Covid, or through other illnesses. Prayer is our communication with God, to do his will on his behalf here on earth.

In Casualty it is a very brief relationship with patient and healer, but in Christ, it is a restorative relationship and one we can and should fully depend on.

We cannot help to heal others in our own right, but only through the power of the Father, can we bring spiritual comfort and healing. Amen.