

Epiphany 5: 5 February Mark 1:29-39

What is the pattern of your days? Now it is February the year gets under way and some already feel overwhelmed. What is the pattern of your days? What constitutes a balanced life?

On Thursday Nikolai and I were reading about St Tegla, an early Celtic whose healing well in Wales is place of pilgrimage for many. A prayer said at that place goes like this:

Saint Tegla,
Companion and friend,
journey with us to the still point of our beings
where we are one with God.
We can't do it all or have it all.
May we let go of the feverish pace that exhausts us,
May we come to the Refreshing Springs of Divine Love
and drink from the abundant grace
that is always there for us.
Strengthen us to make the changes necessary
so we can live a more balanced, healthy,
and holy life now and in the future.
Amen.

Jesus journal might read: Sabbath go to Synagogue..teach cast out demon.. off to Peter's place, heal .. heal, cast out demons...early morning prayer...discovered by Peter et al...off to another place heal, preach, cast out demons..
very full life. that included time out. time for refreshment

(I am indebted to William Loader for his reflections on this passage.)
'A day or two in the life of JC! Mark begins his account of Jesus' public ministry with a first day. Last week we had the first journal entry. Here we have two more plus the first event of the following day. Mark does not lose his hearers in detail. He mentions Simon and Andrew, James and John. This recalls earlier verses and the account of their calling. Mark will have envisaged hearers listening to the whole story and making such connections rather than the way we read his gospel in small bites.

You could surmise that Mark is making a point here by having the kingdom start at home. That may not be Mark's intention, but its truth stands nevertheless. Home would be a complex house where extended family lived, including Peter's mother-in-law. So Peter was married and Paul in 1 Cor 9 seems to confirm this. It is a pity we hear nothing of his spouse, but this was a world in which in men's stories women are mostly invisible if they are not either a source of trouble or delight. Here is an exception. Even if unnamed, we have a woman. She matters. Jesus cares about her. He heals her. Her temperature drops.

She serves them. Let us not romanticise Mark. He is a man of his time as are those who passed on to him the story. The woman remains unnamed. She is healed to do what women stereotypically did: look after the men. It is spinning a yarn to make too much out of the word, 'serve', here, as if she is the first deacon. We can espouse such values without fiddling the text. On the other hand, note that Mark tells us in 15:40-41 that many women from Galilee followed Jesus and they were there at the end when the men fled.

It is remarkable to me that it is twenty years, only twenty years since women were first ordained to the priesthood in the Anglican Church of Australia. We are fortunate that here in Canberra Goulburn, mutual ministry is the norm. It was not always so, and it is not so everywhere, even now! So we serve, in culturally appropriate ways and push the boundaries.

Observance of sabbath law rather than climate is reflected in the fact that people waited till the evening to bring their sick and deranged to Jesus. The sabbath ended at sunset, so such work was acceptable in the evening. 1:32-34 is a short summary through which Mark tells us that the two kinds of activities, exorcism and healing, which he has recounted as events on the first day were typical. They were repeated in the evening and on following days. Notice how Mark carefully builds links to what has gone before and what follows. Crowds at the door – we shall find that happening again in 2:2. Demons who knew him – this recalls the incident in the synagogue, but also recalls what they knew, namely the truth set forth in the baptism.

Altogether, 1:29-34 tells us why the kingdom is good news: **people are healed and set free**. One strong form of future hope among the prophets and later Jewish writings is that God will bring liberation and healing. We find it in Isaiah 61:1; 35:5-6; 29:18-19 and elsewhere. Here in Jesus' ministry it is happening. So the events are important both in themselves and in what they symbolise.

Our reading ends with the morning after the night before (1:35-39). The 'hangover' of yesterday evening's work sends Jesus back where he started: the wilderness and prayer. This is not only a neat touch on Mark's part, because it takes us back there. It is also one of those small hints about Jesus' need to care for himself and regain strength and energy. How could Jesus do this, when there were so many people in need! Simon and co press the point.

Jesus did not have the need to respond to every need. I have always found it odd that people imagine Jesus met every need. When Jesus was in Capernaum, he was not in Bethsaida! People in Bethsaida could have been healed. When he was in the wilderness, people back in town were suffering. Jesus might have met the needs of one or two per cent of the needy in Palestine of the day, but even that is probably far too high a guess. Coming to terms with our human limitations in time and space and energy is crucial if we are to survive in ministry and Jesus was no exception. Jesus did not exercise his ministry on the basis of his need to

be needed, but on the basis of what he could do as a bearer of the Spirit, nothing more. That is always enough – and never enough to meet all needs. Failure to acknowledge our limitations often leads to denial of the immensity of human need, because we are afraid of not being in control.

Many locals will have been deeply disappointed when Jesus decided to go off to other regions of Galilee. One can imagine the recriminations: I brought my dying mother here. How can you pass her by? One way to cope is to be callous and hardened: the 'strategic plan' is numerical growth; to hell with people! But Mark is not portraying Jesus that way. He is interested here in describing the impact of Jesus' ministry, but also the problems which it caused – not just in congestion in front of doorways. Crowds often dictate agendas; success spawns its own rules. **Mark shows Jesus acting deliberately in ways which will maximise the impact of the good news, but Jesus will not be dictated to by the rules of the game.** In some sense they also belong to the powers from which he must liberate people.

1:38-39 return us to Jesus' sense of mission. We are on track. He is preaching in their synagogues and exorcising, as he did in 1:21-28. Well meaning disciples did not succeed in getting in the road. He knew a response to pain which avoided the alternatives of needing to meet every need or of coping by denying it. In other respects he models 'best management practice': he knew what he was about and never lost sight of it, and that was a 'big picture' understanding of people and what the reign of God could mean for them.

I received an email from Michael Faragher this week. Where he reflects on his week and on prayer. I found it very moving and have his permission to share it with you:

Dear Friends,

Landmark in my treatment this week- a third (10) treatments now completed. I am a bit sore and sorry, but it's good to be well on the way. The radiography staff are helpful and generous to a fault. Tomorrow, I'm flying back to Canberra for the weekend and have to have an early morning appointment. The team treating me all volunteered to change their shifts to accommodate me.

My hand therapist at the Mater Hospital is another gem. She patiently but determinedly helps me to restore control, movement and function in my left hand. I have got to the point this week where I have been able, albeit in a rudimentary fashion, to play the piano. (A musical friend of mine in Brisbane commented- I thought unkindly!- that I only ever treat a score or sheet music as a point of departure anyway). I am so encouraged, that I intend to play for the Taize service at All Saints on Sunday week. If not necessarily the best musical performance, it will certainly be good physical and spiritual therapy for me. (and, I hope, also for the congregation!). I also had a bit of fun at my therapy appointment yesterday. I had to have a new splint made-these are constructed from special plastic which

is shaped under heat-and Lisa my therapist asked what colour I would like. I asked if green was a possibility, that being the current liturgical colour. An interesting discussion with several other patients and therapists in the room followed, during which I initiated them all into the mysteries of high Anglican ritual. There is a wall in the treatment room which features patients past and present sporting their splints, bandages and other appliances in their work: a policeman, lion tamer, various professional sports people, as well as office and factory workers are all represented. Next week, there will also be a photo of an Anglican priest celebrating the Eucharist resplendent in green chasuble, stole and splint.

I have found myself thinking a lot about prayer recently. Yesterday I went to a parish jumble sale at St Augustine's in Brisbane where my mother and father were working. I have apparently been on the prayer list at St Augustine's for some time and was able to meet many kind people who have been praying assiduously for me. I know and feel myself supported by a great raft of prayer from many people across Australia and indeed the world, It is said that confession is good for the soul, but bad for the reputation, but I still find myself grappling with and trying to understand the nature and methodology of prayer. A great Roman Catholic friend of mine routinely prays the following when out driving,

“Hail Mary full of grace: help me find a parking space” and

“Hail Mary, heaven’s Queen: make this traffic light turn green”

I know these are meant to be tongue-in-cheek, but I worry about a similar sentiment often expressed in prayer, that is, a sort of “cargo cult” mentality or a theology of entitlement-“I’ve attended church, given sacrificially of my time, talents and treasure and therefore God now owes me.” Sometimes there are also overtones of prayer being a test and measure of one's faith-e.g. if we truly believe, we have the confidence to ask God for anything, and if our faith is sufficient surely he will respond to our request. Of course, we don't have to look far in human history to see the innate fallacy of this expectation. One only has to think of Dietrich Boenhoffer, who despite his faith, bravery and unrelenting witness for Jesus and the gospel in the face of unspeakable brutality was ‘rewarded’ with execution in a concentration camp days before the end of the war in 1945. I'm sure none of the thousands of people who were praying for him at the time asked God for this outcome.

I find myself inclining to the view of CS Lewis who said, “I don't pray to change God, I pray to change myself”. Abraham Lincoln also expressed a similar idea. At a time when the North's fortunes in the Civil War were at a low ebb, Lincoln was bailed up by a formidable group of Christian Republican Ladies. Their leader said the president, “Mr Lincoln, you need have no fear about the outcome of this war. We have been praying long and hard about the matter and are now firmly of the

conclusion that God is on our side." Lincoln reportedly shook his head sadly and said, "Madam, all I can hope is that I am on God's side".

Of course, it's always good to be reminded that prayer does not have to be a frantic list of requests and instructions. The prayer I'm finding so helpful and refreshing at the moment is simply silently opening myself up to God and quietly rejoicing in his company and care. I also find myself being reminded that our faith is built on mystery, and part if not all of my apprehension of prayer must remain a holy mystery. There can be nothing more godly than praying for health and freedom from suffering for others; I thank the ladies of St Augustine's and all who are praying for me for embracing the mystery of our relationship with one who has created, redeemed, sustains and loves us all.

Blessings,

Michael Faragher

I end with a prayer said at St Tegla's well:

*May we be filled with peace and joy,
May we live compassionately and gently,
May we slow down and smell the flowers,
May there be a welcome for us wherever we go,
In the love of family and friends.
May our hearts be merry and rejoice
And now may God bless us and bless us kindly.
Amen*

Susanna Pain