



Sermon: - 4th February 2018

Do they not know? Have they not heard?

1 Corinthians 9: 16 - 23; Mark 1: 29 – 39

This ad from the 1950s could be an illustration for the gospel reading this morning. Mark chapter 1 verses 30 to 31: “Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever... so Jesus went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her, and she began to wait on them.” Ladies of the congregation, what do you make of that verse? It just seems so typical, doesn’t it? No sooner is the poor soul feeling a bit better than she is up and about and making dinner for all the men! There are a number of these bold and extremely sexist ads from the 1950s.

Here’s another one! The poor little woman can’t even cook! Recently, an artist took a number of these advertisements and redrew them to reflect contemporary society – sort of!

Gentlemen, what you make of these! It certainly wasn’t like that in Jesus day! However, we know from elsewhere in the Gospels that Jesus’ attitude to women wasn’t typical of his day, and it hardly seems likely that he would have insisted that Simon’s mother- in-law, as soon as she was well, got back into the kitchen, so is there more to this than just an archetypal picture of the entrenched roles of men and women in 1st century Palestine?

The verb that Mark uses to describe Peter’s mother-in-law “serving” just after being healed is diakoneo. This is the same verb that Jesus will later use to describe his own ministry. His ministry was characterised by a desire to serve rather than to be served. He set the example and asked his disciples to follow it. We are tempted to see this passage through 21st-century eyes as sexist, but perhaps instead we can see it as the first example of true discipleship. Simon’s mother-in-law, on her sick bed, would have been a burden on her family in days when there was of course no National Health Service. Illness carried a social cost, too, as the sick person was unable to contribute to the life of the family or the community. When Jesus restored Simon’s mother-in-law to health, he restored her to her full place in the community. And it is in this context that she rises from her sick bed, whole and well, and takes up again the responsibilities of her place in the

community. Her response to restoration is to follow, as a disciple, in serving rather than being served.

Those of us who have experienced any serious illness know that what accompanies it is an exile from the normal patterns of life. In those circumstances it's not difficult to understand how Simon's mother-in-law felt, and why she rushed to return to her normal pattern of living. When you have been unable to do all the things you normally do, it is a joy and a pleasure to return to them.

After healing Simon's mother-in-law, Jesus went on to heal and cure many others. And still later, when he was looking for time to be alone, Simon came looking for him, saying, "everyone is looking for you!"

They were of course looking for a miracle. But actually, what they were seeking was revelation. Jesus was a focus for the longings of his generation. The longing to be well, the longing to be free, the longing to matter. And so, they sought him out.

Today, people are still longing to be well, people are still longing to be free, people are still longing to matter. In essence, they are still seeking Jesus, but they are looking in the wrong places. They believe that material comfort will give meaning to their lives. They believe that the stars hold the secret to happiness. They believe that wealth and/or power will bring them status and that status means somehow that they matter. Those of us here this morning know that none of these things are true, and that only in following Jesus can we be truly well, can we be truly free, and in God's love for us, discover that we truly matter.

But how shall they know who have not heard? Isaiah paints a glorious picture of the majesty, the kingship, the unsurpassed splendour of God. "Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers... He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing."

This is the same God who, in Jesus, came to serve. The same God who served Simon's mother-in-law by offering her healing, and who was in turn served by her in her gratitude.

This is the same God who, in Jesus, came to serve us. Who offers us healing, and freedom, and status as a child of God, a valuable part of the body of Christ, and part of his kingdom.

But how shall they know who have not heard? As well as the example of Simon's mother-in-law, Paul, in the letter to the Corinthians, helps us to understand how to take the message out to those

who need to hear it. "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some." Paul tells us that he has become like a Jew to the Jews, to the weak he became weak. Although he doesn't put it quite like this in the passage we read today, elsewhere he tells us that he has become like a Greek to the Greeks. Paul's first and foremost loyalty was to the God he loved but in that loyalty and because of his love he wanted to bring others to know God. And he did that by going out to find them. By meeting them on their own territory, rather than expecting them to abide by his rules.

So, what might that mean for us here today? How do we meet people on their own territory? Partly I think that means not being afraid to go into the world into the places where people go who do not know Jesus. Some Christians frown on dancing, or concerts, or cinemas, or bingo, or pubs, but if Jesus lived on earth now, where do you think he would go to meet people?

Robert Warren was the rector of Saint Thomas Crooks in Sheffield, at that point one of the fastest-growing churches in England. One day, having taken a funeral and therefore wearing his clerical garb, he stopped to buy a newspaper. As he stepped out of his car, a man said, "Excuse me, can you help me?" Warren looked round and saw a man in a wheelchair. Well, a Church of England vicar in his "uniform", what else could he say but, "Of course I can help you, what would you like me to do for you?" The man handed him a fistful of bank notes and said, "would you put this on the 2.30 at Aintree, please?" It was only then that Warren realised that the newspaper shop he was heading for was right next to a betting shop. Feeling rather trapped, he took the man's money and went into the betting shop. As soon as he stepped through the door the place fell silent. Somewhat embarrassed, and plucking up all his courage, he said, "I need to put this on the 2.30 at Aintree, but I've never done this before!" At which point the buzz of talk broke out again and he was overwhelmed with offers of help and assistance.

What does it mean to take the good news to those who have not heard. Partly I think it means not expecting people to necessarily conform to our standards! People might choose to spend their time in ways we don't approve of; or spend their money in ways we think are wasteful; or speak or act in ways that we think disrespectful. How would Jesus deal with them? Partly it means going outside of our comfort zones, to meet them in their comfort zones!

And if, praise God, they came to church! How would we cope? Would we, like the punters in the betting shop, welcome strangers who had no idea what they were doing? Who might behave in ways we thought were disrespectful? What would it mean to be a Jew to the Jews, a Greek to the Greeks, a friend to strangers who don't understand the etiquette of a Sunday morning service!

What would Jesus do? How would he welcome the stranger? In days gone by, in a society where church was part of the culture, people were expected to believe anyway, to come along to church and know how to behave, and then they belonged to the community.

Now, in post Christian society, people need to belong before they believe, and even then, their behaviour won't necessarily be what we expect. Does that matter? What matters more? That they adhere to our standards? Or that they are here, worshipping God!

We have come along way this morning from the healing of Simon's mother-in-law. Through her ministry of hospitality and Paul's example of how to take the good news of this amazing God of which Isaiah speaks, and the gospel of Jesus Christ to those who have never heard it. But I think that the key to all this is in three words: Ministry of Hospitality. Simon's mother-in-law was hospitable. Jesus was hospitable, he welcomed everyone. Paul's attitude was one of hospitality, to make other people feel welcomed, acceptable, and wanted. In fact, those punters in the betting shop exercise the Ministry of Hospitality! If others are going to come to know Jesus, we too need to exercise the Ministry of Hospitality. I'm not pretending that it's easy. We might have to abandon deeply held preferences. We might have to step outside our comfort zones. All But what would Jesus do? Do they not know? Have they not heard? Not unless we tell them, or show them, or love them!