

## Mark 1:40-45 ~ Jesus' missional spirituality

The central theme of Mark's Gospel is the arrival of the reign of God in the person of Jesus. In Jesus' confrontation with the demonic we learn something of the nature of this Kingdom which he embodies: it is about binding the "strong man"<sup>1</sup> in order to set women and men free.

Another preoccupation of this Gospel is what it means to be called to follow this Jesus; what does it mean to be Jesus' disciple?

Today's reading is not just about a miraculous healing – though it is that, and scholars of every persuasion agree that astonishing healings characterised Jesus' ministry; but more than this, it is a story which tells us about the sort of spirituality that Jesus' disciples must have if they are to be like him and follow him in his mission.

I want to suggest that in this story, as recollected by Peter, Mark's source, we see a spiritual dynamic at work which lies at the core of the Gospel and what it means for any of us to lay claim to this Gospel. This dynamic is around:

- *desperation*
- *anger and compassion*
- and *redemption* through identification and substitution

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### **Desperation**

You may recall from last week, Jesus returns from the solitary place, where he sought God in prayer, and recommences his mission in Galilee – preaching in synagogues about the Kingdom of God and driving out demons.

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<sup>1</sup> Mk.3:27.

Suddenly he is confronted by a man with a severe skin disease. As we heard in our reading from Leviticus, this man is unclean – both literally and figuratively. He is isolated and marginalised within his community. He lives “outside the gates”. He is also wretched and desperate.

And so, disregarding his vulnerability and in defiance of strict protocol, the man confronts Jesus and begs on his knees to be healed.

Here in a nut shell is a picture of our human condition in a world alienated from God. Here is the famine in the horn of Africa; the Arab Spring gone sour; or, closer to home, any one of a clutch of social conditions we learn of in our daily news and even experience within our families.

In such a world there are many who, like this man, are at their wits end and desperate for healing and restoration. There are many who are calling out for a liberating, healing word of transformation to be spoken into their lives. If we are to be followers of Jesus, ones who accompany him in his mission and want to be like him, then we too must discover these words of power. We must know who we are and in proper confidence, not with a swagger but in bold humility, speak his words to a world that desperately needs to hear them.

But these words will only have power and desperate people will only be able to hear them when they see through what we do, how we live, that we are speaking the truth.

### **Anger and compassion**

When the man begs Jesus, we read, Jesus is “filled with compassion” – or at least that is how most translations put it. The word here is *orgistheis*. And actually, the plain meaning of this word is not to be filled with compassion, but to become angry.

So why is it translated most often “compassion” rather than “anger”? Perhaps, compassion is a more acceptable term for us when we think of Jesus. We like the idea of a warm compassionate spiritual guy, and, by extension, a loving, compassionate God who brings healing to the suffering.

Yet the word means to become “angry”. When we look at Jesus we see the heart of God – a God who is filled with compassion for us in our need yet is angry at our human condition, angry at the sin and evil that locks us into the desperation from which we long to be delivered.

This man was scabrous, but his pitiful social condition, his rejection and the pain this caused, his desperation and sense of hopelessness originated from his community – a community charged with modelling the character of God.

This is not right. There is no justice in it and Jesus is angry about that. And so he acts. Filled with compassion and holy anger, he “reaches out and touches the man with his hand”. He connects personally with this man.

But in doing so Jesus crosses a line. With a word of liberation, the man is healed, he is set free. But is not without cost to Jesus who will eventually be nailed to a tree for such behaviours so threatening are they to the social fabric of his time.

We may not be comfortable with such a spirituality. We may want “our own personal Jesus, someone to hear our prayers, someone who’s there”, as Johnny cash puts it, but this Jesus, the one we find in the Gospel is not so comfortable to be around.

Scholars often describe Mark Gospel as “a passion narrative with an extended introduction”. Do we want to become part of this passion, this holy anger and compassion and the emotional, physical and social demands it calls us to?

### **Substitution – the way of the cross**

But it’s even more challenging than this...

Something I only noticed a few days ago, is the deep irony in this story. Through a twist in the tail, this story prefigures Jesus’ work on the cross and, in so doing, points us to the cruciform shape of the disciple’s spirituality.

In desperation, the man comes in from “outside the gate”, from his banishment. He calls out. Jesus meets him in his need. He reaches out to the man and touches him. He crosses the line, he meets the man in his human condition and, at cost to himself, acts to heal him.

The law that was given to keep a check on disease achieves its goal only through Jesus’ touch fulfilling it. The man is “immediately’ restored to wholeness and reconnected with his people.

Yet, so overwhelmed is Jesus by others who seek his touch, that Jesus himself takes the man’s place in the lonely places. “Ironically, it is Jesus who ends up unable to enter towns and cities, compelled to live the kind of “outcast” and wilderness existence from which the now cleansed man has been set free”.<sup>2</sup>

Here is the cross. Jesus achieves the man’s redemption through substituting himself for the man. He becomes the man to save him – or as Saint Paul would later put it: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”.<sup>3</sup>

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As we look to Easter, the looming cross and empty tomb which stand at its centre, I guess there are two questions I find myself asking:

- what will our mission look like, here in this place and time, as we seek to follow the Jesus we find in this extraordinary story?
- are we open to embracing such a cruciform spirituality in order to sustain us in this a mission?

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<sup>2</sup> Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom – A Theological Reading of Mark’s Gospel*, Liturgical Press, 2008. P.50.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21.