

**Sermon**

Sunday 7 February 2021

Lesson

St Mark 1: 29 – 39

Human beings are strange creatures. We live between two worlds. We know ourselves to be objects in the universe buffeted around by the forces of nature, moulded by our DNA, and shaped by our culture and family history. Yet we crave beauty and meaning; we enter the spiritual realm. Whether we live in a single room, a flat, detached house or mansion, we spend great effort to make it beautiful, attractive, and peaceful; to make it ‘our’ home. And who can live without meaning in their lives?

Many find meaning in their relationships with family and friends, commitment to work, or appreciation of nature, in the love of animals or majestic landscapes. Ultimately, through philosophy and religion, across our entire evolutionary history, humanity has wrestled with who and what we are. We live between two worlds: between the physical, material world of everyday life and the world of love, beauty and meaning.

In the Gospel of St Mark, the first of the Gospels to be written, Jesus began His ministry as He walked by the sea of Galilee. The shoreline, surely, is a symbol of that liminal space: Jesus walked between two worlds. The stony shore is a symbol of this physical, material earth – we are stardust from the centre of exploding stars – and the waves, their sound and energy, is a symbol of the spiritual. If we read the Bible, including the Gospel stories, imaginatively, as stories told to help us on our inner journey, our eyes will be opened to ever new possibilities. Scripture is eternally fertile.

From the Galilean shoreline, Jesus and His new followers made their



way to the town  
of Capernaum.

In our Gospel  
lesson, Jesus and  
His disciples left  
the Capernaum  
synagogue, that

place of teaching and study, to go to the home of Simon and Andrew.

There, Simon's mother-in-law was bedridden with a fever. The nineteenth century artist, John Bridges, colourfully depicts the scene in a setting quite different from Peter's modest home in Galilean town. The focus for Bridges is the hallowed face of Jesus and, through a moment's reflective gazing, we too may be drawn nearer into Christ's mystical presence.

The seventeenth century painter, Joost van Geel, depicts Simon's mother-in-law as a woman in advanced old age, infirm and weak. In contrast to Bridges, the focus for van Geel is not Jesus, but



Simon's mother-in-law: in her old age, Jesus is with her. She is transfigured by God's light.

In the carefully written narrative of Mark's Gospel, we are told that when Jesus heard of her sickness, He approached her, took hold of her hand, and raised her to her feet. Once on her feet, she attended to their needs. If, for a moment, we step away from a literal interpretation of the story, what do we hear? Simon's mother-in-law attended to their needs. 'Attended to their needs' implies that she set a table and prepared a meal for them: that's important. And, did you hear that word: we passed it almost without a second glance? Jesus 'raised' her to her feet. Imaginatively, is this the first resurrection story in the first Gospel to be written? Once on her feet, she set a table: is this an implied image of the heavenly banquet?

We never hear of Simon's mother-in-law again and we hear nothing at all of Simon's wife. Had his wife died? Jesus healed and raised Simon's mother-in-law. In the Jewish tradition, Jewish identity was established by the mother. A child was Jewish if the mother was Jewish, no matter the ethnic origin of the father. However, a child was not considered to be Jewish if only the father was Jewish. In this imaginative story, I wonder if the mother-in-law is a symbol of the

Jewish people, the Jewish nation. I wonder if the writer of Mark wants us to understand that part of Jesus' ministry was the healing and restoration of Jesus' own people, the people of Judah?

In the Gospel story, after sunset, many people who were ill, diseased or 'demon-possessed' came to Jesus and were healed. For me, this healing is not magic: it is not the fanciful overcoming of cruel viruses or the straightening of deformed limbs; it is healing of the soul. So much of human restlessness is about self-worth, the need to love and be loved, and the craving for meaning and beauty. On the shoreline, from that liminal space, Jesus brought and brings spiritual solace. They were healed 'after sunset': they encountered Jesus in their own darkness.

The Gospel story, the Scriptural poem, continues as Jesus got up, 'rose', early next morning and went to a remote area, a deserted place, to pray. Again, the suggestion is of resurrection. The resurrection stories of the Gospels take place 'at daybreak': light overcomes darkness. Early in the morning, Jesus sought quietness, the aloneness

of encounter with the Eternal. We do not need to be monks and mystics to feel intuitively the world we cannot see, the Divine Mystery in which we live, the beauty that takes us out of ourselves, and the selflessness of love in which we find our truest fulfilment.



One of western art's most famous painters, Vincent van Gogh, renowned for his landscapes, still lifes, portraits and self-portraits, spent much

of his life in poverty and facing his own 'demons'. He died by his own hand aged thirty-seven. Yet in the midst of his personal darkness and artistic brilliance, van Gogh saw the Divine Presence in all that is good and beautiful. He believed Christ to be the greatest of all artists. Van Gogh said:

Christ alone, of all the philosophers, magicians, etc., has affirmed eternal life as the most important certainty, the infinity of time, the futility of death, the necessity

and purpose of serenity and devotion. He lived serenely, as an artist greater than all other artists, scorning marble and clay and paint, working in the living flesh.

Van Gogh suffered from mental illness – his own ‘demons’. It was as a patient in the psychiatric asylum in southern France that van Gogh was said to have painted his alluring work, *Starry Night*. The prison-like asylum was crushing him but through the bars of his cell window, he gazed up at the night sky. The painting brings light and hope into the night’s darkness, into the darkness of van Gogh’s mind. He described the night sky as ‘a great starlit vault of heaven....one can only call God’.

Amidst the darkness and turmoil of the painted scene, the swirling light of the eleven stars, the moon hanging over the town, at the very centre is church building, a physical and visible sign of another world, another dimension, the spiritual at the heart of the material. In his confinement, did van Gogh feel the freedom of God, the healing touch of Jesus and, perhaps fleetingly, feel himself to be resurrected, raised

to new life? In images of Scriptural poetry, from the poverty of his imprisonment, did he see set before him the banquet table of heaven?

There's more to the story of Jesus and Simon's mother-in-law than meets the eye.

Amen.