

High St Uniting Church Frankston

Seek Time with God

Mark 1:29 – 39



The Lectionary is, in some ways, a strange approach to reading the scriptures, by dividing books into little, digestible portions. We don't do that with any other books, even for book groups. Imagine, "Today's discussion of *Pride and Prejudice* will focus on Mr Collin's conversation with Lady Catherine De Burgh." It's even stranger with today's Lectionary selection. It begins with Mark's favourite word 'immediately', which means for context we should have heard, again, last

week's story to begin today's reading, and then goes on to include two sections of Mark's account covering four different stories! What are we expected to gain from this disconnected and yet complicated Lectionary portion? I, for one, have more trust in the Lectionary compilers, and the work of the Spirit, and look instead at the questions being raised by the text. After all that healing, why did Jesus sneak off before dawn and abandon all those sick people?

The normal answer to this is that Jesus often sought seclusion for reflection and prayer. It was his necessary time for connection with God. What we might call refreshing or recharging. All that healing would have taken its toll and Jesus needed a quiet time. Such behaviour would be a clear modelling to the disciples, and the readers, of the need for quiet times of prayer and reflection in the busyness and exertion of ministry. That answer has power and resonance, I am sure you have heard many sermons over the years saying just that – Jesus, the Son of God, sought seclusion and quiet for prayer and reflection, how much more do we need to do just that. But I think there is something else that Mark is trying to tell us in this set of stories. An answer that cuts across the strangeness of the Lectionary selection to give one message from these four stories.

Mark tells us that Jesus got up "while it was still very dark" and he went off to a "deserted place". Dark is a loaded term in Mark's Gospel, it is a term that speaks as much about separation from God as it does about lack of light. It was dark when Jesus was handed over to Pilate, and it was dark when the women came to the tomb in grief. This was Jesus in a dark place, seeking light as much as it was about prayer. Jesus goes to a deserted place – in Greek it is 'wilderness' – and, again, this is a loaded term for Mark. We are only in the first chapter, and he has already used this word twice before; John came from the wilderness calling for a straight path, and Jesus went into the wilderness to face his temptations. It would have been a bit difficult to find wilderness in the town of Capernaum, this is a term to make you reflect on earlier stories and tie all this chapter together. In this dawn encounter we see Jesus trying to find a straight path in the dark, facing the temptation to stay in Capernaum and set up shop as a miracle worker and a healer. The very reason for Peter and the disciples to hunt down Jesus and bring him back to the crowd of sick people around the house. "Come on Jesus, look at the need, look at the ministry you have here; come back, everyone is searching for you". A touch of irony, even Jesus is searching for himself!

Matthew and Luke spell out the temptations that Jesus faced, talk of turning stones into bread or having the fame of the whole world. Instead, Mark weaves the temptations into the stories of Jesus ministry; to be the famous miracle worker of Capernaum would have been a temptation for Jesus, something he had to go off in the early morning to reflect on, to reconnect with the will of God. Peter says “Come back, people need you”; and Jesus answers, “No, I’m not going back to those people, let us head off to other towns, they are in need as well. This is what I came to do”. Instead of the temptation to become famous for himself and healing, he heads off on the path of proclaiming the kingdom of God and bringing that kingdom close to where people are, in word and action. The dark time in the wilderness to fight temptation has worked; Jesus is once more on the path of God’s will. More than prayer for spiritual recharge, here is seclusion to reconnect with the will of God; the will of God contained in Jesus’ preaching – ‘the kingdom of God has come near’.

If you build it, they will come. The temptation that Jesus felt, and that Peter wanted to buy into, was to stay in one place and make the world come to him. This is the attraction model of church; great preaching or ministry, plenty of wonderful events, warm hospitality, all to persuade people to come to where we are. Jesus breaks through that temptation by saying “Let’s go!” As Paul wrote to the Romans,

How are people to call on one they do not believe? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?

Sent does not necessarily mean going to the neighbouring towns like Jesus but it does mean looking outside and acting outside of the community. We gather to seek time with God, just as Jesus went out to that deserted place at dawn, but the gathering always ends with sending. When we seek God, we find that so many others are seeking God, and we are being sent to answer that seeking. Instead of four stories of Jesus in Capernaum, we have one story of why Jesus came. Let us go, let us do, let us reach, let us speak, let us follow; for that is why Jesus came.