**Isaiah 40.21-31
Mark 1.29-39
4th February 2024

 Raising us up**

*Gracious God – may your Living Word come to us afresh this morning – so touch, we pray our minds and hearts with your grace and truth – through Christ our Lord and in the power of your Spirit. Amen*

As we said last week, Mark’s Gospel goes at quite a gallop, and unlike some of us preachers, he never used two words when one would do!

This is the gospel we’ll be using for most of this year in our lectionary readings and today we are still in the first chapter and, after the calling of the disciples in Galilee, Jesus is in Capernaum, and it’s the evening of ‘day one’ of his public ministry.

And what a day it had been. Last week, as it were, we went with him to synagogue, where he preached. Then, after the service Jesus went to Simon Peter’s house. So, we know where Peter lived: Capernaum, and we know he was married, but as to the names either of his wife or mother-in-law, well they are simply not thought to be important enough to get a mention.

The bible, as was the custom of the day, was written very much from a man’s point of view and, although it seems uncomfortable to us in our time and culture, the women in Peter’s family remain nameless.

What we do know is that Peter’s mother-in-law was seriously ill. She’s described as having a ‘fever’ and in those days it was a symptom often leading on to something fatal.

Today’s reading talks of Jesus holding her hand and healing her so she could be *raised to her feet*. The following verse seems astonishing in that the very next thing she did, apparently, was to *attend to their needs!* One minute she seems to be dying, the next she’s serving supper.

So much is happening on this first day. At the Synagogue service the people were blown away by Jesus’ sermon. At Peter’s home Jesus enters a domestic crisis and brings joy where there was potential long-term sorrow. And come sundown, now that Sabbath had passed and it was permissible to travel, a crowd gathers outside the house not so subtlety urging him on to continue these compassionate healings.

He must have been exhausted. But maybe he slept well, and even satisfied, that night, for hadn’t he spent a day out and about with people, engaging in worship, teaching, sharing acts of love, bringing hope, healing and wholeness to many in Simon Peter’s hometown of Capernaum in north west Galilee?

After a night’s rest the passage tells us Jesus was up early the next day and went off at first light to a quiet place to pray. That’s always been an inspiring picture, prompting us to take seriously the rhythm of prayer and work, recognising the importance of both and the balance needed between them.

On this *morning after the night before*, it’s not surprising that once they have found him, or maybe we should say *disturbed him*, the disciples (many of whom seem to be Capernaum, born and bred) want him to basically repeat Day One in their town. So, they greet Jesus with the words *everyone is looking for you*.

I wonder how we might have responded? I dare say many of us would have been tempted to stay put in Capernaum where things obviously seemed to be going well. In fact, I suspect such a situation might well have fed our ego. *We are needed*, we might have thought, so let’s stay on.

Yet that’s not Jesus’ Modus Operandi. His way of working is different. He moves on because that is what he senses is the Spirit’s call upon his life. His is a peripatetic ministry, not one to be spent in a single place but in many places, which means he won’t be around long enough in Capernaum to heal everyone.

Perhaps there is an important lesson in this for us today?

Imagine when the news gets out later that morning that Jesus has left town, surely there would have been considerable disappointment in some quarters? There would be those who came today full of expectation only to find that they had rather missed the boat and they should have queued up yesterday. Yet Jesus moves on, somehow acutely aware of his humanity meaning he could only ever be in one place at a time and his mission was to broadcast his message to as many as possible which meant he was never going to be anywhere for very long.

So, what we are seeing here is that Jesus works within the limitations he has. He shares as much as he can with as many as he can. Yet this side of Pentecost not everyone will encounter him.

Most of us know that when we *need to be needed* it’s easy to over promise and under perform. We’d love to do more and to help more, yet the reality is we cannot be everyone’s solution. The choices we have to make, in light of our limitations, can often seem unfair and open to criticism. Yet Jesus prayed and then moved on. He left Capernaum with the crowd wanting more and that’s a tough love decision.

*Let us move on*, said Jesus. The words of someone who seems to know what he’s about, who isn’t letting the adulation of the crowd go to his head but is following the calling of the Spirit to go near and far sharing the good news of God’s love.

But, as we backtrack a little perhaps it’s worth asking: what was it that Jesus was really doing on that first day of his public ministry in Capernaum?

We are told he preached and he healed. In other words, that are, perhaps, not quite so religious, he brought wholeness back into people’s lives and he offered hope.

In doing so he brings in something of God’s Kingdom to the here and now.

Prophets like Isaiah longed for a day when God’s presence blessed the world in such a way. They spoke in poetic terms of the broken hearted being comforted or the captive being set free. And in today’s reading from the Jewish scriptures, we have that beautiful picture of those who trust in God as *rising up on eagle’s wings*.

In the gospels Jesus offers hope in his inspiring words and healing actions.

The ancient writers describe the lame walking and the demon possessed now set free and at peace. Today we might use different terms, yet whether it’s through medicine or prayer God’s will is still that we, his beloved, should know wholeness and healing in our body, mind and spirit. And, scripture tells us, God wishes that for the whole world.

My maternal grandmother was a strong character in our family. From an early age I looked up to her with love and respect. Early in her adult life her knee crumbled, and she had to have her leg stiffened. I remember as a six-year-old walking beside her on summer holidays not bending my leg, just so that I walked like her. She soon told me to stop doing that!

Her character was one of a loving nature showing itself with hands on care.

So, when she was admitted to hospital for a subsequent knee operation, I remember thinking, I was about 8 at the time, that the world had turned a bit upside down. This wonderfully stubborn and resolute lady, this larger-than-life character in my life was now laid low. Instead of looking after others she was being looked after. Visiting her bedside on the Sunday afternoon after her op was the very first time I can ever remember being on a hospital ward and it just felt so very odd seeing my grandmother being looked after by other people.

When I think about it she probably shared quite a lot in common with Peter’s mother-in- law, because once discharged my grandmother didn’t linger long in recuperation. She was up as soon as she could, raised back to the centre of our family life and once again holding us all together.

That’s what I think Jesus was doing. As he blesses the nameless lady of the house, as he restores the man at the temple and those who gathered outside Peter’s front door he was, in Isaiah’s words, raising them up once more on eagles’ wings. Restoring them, not just individually, but as people who could now fit back into their communities and play their part again with dignity. Jesus was looking out for them: body, mind and spirit – no wonder they wanted him to stay!

I think those first days of Mark’s gospel are a picture for us to take with us into this new month and week. Because doesn’t the ministry of Jesus teach us that God wants to restore us all back to wholeness. That is a way, even, of understanding and defining what salvation is all about. Raising us up so that we can play our part in the communities to which we belong: family, church and society. And bit by bit as that happens again and again in our lives it echoes Isaiah’s words that those who look to the Lord will run and not grow faint, will march on and not grow weary as, with God’s help we are raised up on eagle’s wings.

May it be so for us, and for the communities to which we belong, in the name of Jesus who that first day preached with inspiration and touched the lives of those around him with compassion and wholeness. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 2nd February 2024*