

Sunday February 8th: The Mission of the Lord - Robert Innes

I sat in the Archdeacon's office one spring day in 1999, and he described the new parish to me. "I'm afraid they are weary and rather tired", he said. I read the churchwardens' description of what they were looking for in a new vicar. It began, "the new vicar must be fit and energetic." Then I read the church's official history. It was titled "the church on the bad corner" it described how the previous vicar had become too sick to walk around the parish, his predecessor retired early with heart problems, and a previous vicar had died in post. The history was, in fact, the history of sick incumbents!

Well, being only 39 and still in good health, I accepted the post. And after a few of months, I realised that many of the lay leaders in the church had health problems of one kind or another too. What was more, 'health' was a big question for the whole community: there were lots of isolated older people, the men had worked in the mines and so had horrible lung conditions, there seemed to be high numbers of people with chronic physical or mental health conditions. So I knew from the start that my ministry in that place would have to be concerned, in the most general sense, with questions of health and healing.

Today's gospel reading concerns the beginning of Jesus mission, and at the centre of it is his ministry of healing. It's not that Jesus is introduced to us as a doctor. Neither is he charged with setting up the South Galilee regional health authority. It's simply that human need is expressed most acutely in sickness, and when Jesus sees human need he meets it. It is especially in healing that his messianic authority is known. And as we read these few verses in Mark I am amazed by the sheer energy and pace of Jesus's activity. In verse 29 he is attending to just one lady, Peter's mother-in-law. In verse 32, after sunset he is now attending to a great array of people from the whole town who have arrived at this door. And by verse 39 he is travelling through the whole region of Galilee, starting his work in prayer on his own before sunrise, then going out to the people preaching and driving out demons. "They will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint"; had said the prophet Isaiah, and it's with exactly this kind of spiritual and physical energy that Jesus begins his work on earth.

In the opening scenario we read of the encounter of Jesus with Simon Peter's mother-in-law. It is a very beautiful little story. Jesus is staying in Capernaum with James and John at the house of Simon and Andrew. Capernaum has now been excavated by archaeologists and today you can visit the little house where, by tradition anyway, this incident took place. By our standards it's surprisingly small. People lived together in those days in quite small houses in extended families. Jesus and his disciples were in their early 30s so we can guess that Peter's mother-in-law was perhaps in her late 50s, by the standards of the time she was getting on in years. And she is lying in bed with a fever.

At best a fever makes you very uncomfortable, at worst the patient becomes delirious. With a very high temperature, a person starts to lose their mind. Often the most frightening thing about illness is the worry: "What is going to happen to me?" "Will I get better?" Before the advent of antibiotics, human life was terribly vulnerable to diseases like typhoid and diphtheria which killed quickly. We can imagine that Peter's

mother-in-law would have been very frightened by her fever. She would have been afraid for herself and for her family, for her daughter and her headstrong young son-in-law.

Into this situation steps Jesus. A calm, reassuring presence. And he touches her. In fact he takes her hand. Touch can be very significant can't it? In touching this sick lady Jesus was actually breaking the law. A woman with a fever was ritually unclean. One of the features of being unwell or ill is that it isolates you from other people. Whether the illness is physical or mental you can feel and actually be cut off from others.

So Jesus takes the woman's hand. He doesn't back away. He holds her. And the fever leaves her. To be sure the woman would indeed later die of some illness, perhaps even of the same illness. But on this occasion she is physically healed. She rises from her bed and begins to serve Jesus, perhaps to give him some food and drink. No doubt she was deeply relieved, deeply grateful. Her heart was full of praise and thankfulness to God and to Jesus.

Word about Jesus no doubt quickly spread. But it was the Sabbath, and physical movement and work were controlled. So the people had to wait until after sunset before they could come to the house where Jesus was staying. And we read that large numbers of them did indeed come. He healed many of various diseases. He also drove out many demons. And we get here a snapshot of the small town of Capernaum with really quite large numbers of people who are unwell. I'm reminded of visits I've made to African villages where you see quite a lot of people lying on beds inside or outside their little houses. And you quickly become aware of the sheer scale of human need. Jesus responds with compassion and with energy to meet the needs that arrive quite literally at his doorstep.

From Capernaum the mission spreads to the surrounding villages. We read that next morning Jesus is up very early before sunrise in prayer, to begin the day's work. It is a ministry of word and of action. He preaches about the kingdom of God. And he makes known the arrival of the kingdom through his miracles of healing. The good news is made tangible in acts of healing. The significance of the healings is disclosed in the preaching.

Now this extraordinary healing activity is given to us partly to highlight that we are dealing with an extraordinary man. Jesus comes with authority. He is the chosen one. And so he can do extraordinary things. He touches people and they get well. He prays for people and evil spirits depart from them. But this sense of mission is also transmitted and passed on to his disciples and to his followers. Jesus commissions the 12 to go out on mission, and he gives to them authority over evil spirits. Though in Mark's gospel the disciples aren't always successful, yet in principle they carry Jesus authority with them. And so also, the healing missionary activity of the Lord is passed on to his church and even to us.

"They will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint", says Isaiah. The scale of human need can sometimes feel overwhelming. Just managing for ourselves, conducting our own daily lives, looking after those in our own family, that can seem a real struggle, let alone looking after others.

And it is patently obvious that in our own strength we are weak and fragile. Our capacity to help feels woefully inadequate. Yet we are imbued with the Spirit of God, with his dynamic energy, the same energy that impelled the world-changing mission of Jesus. Things that are quite impossible for us, are not impossible for God, and as Jesus says a little later in Mark's gospel, in a situation where his disciples seem discouraged and impotent "Everything is possible for those who believe."

Very concretely, what does Holy Trinity do by way of continuing Jesus healing mission? Well quite a lot actually. For a start there are some of us here who work professionally as doctors or health workers. One of our clergy is a consultant psychologist. We have an official hospital visitor. Our pastoral assistant provides counselling and care for individuals, one of our members is growing a private psychotherapy practice, another now chairs the English speaking Community Health Service. We are linked into the British Charitable Fund which supports older people in need, and I am on the pastoral board of the Oasis Christian Counselling service. The clergy are always pleased to pray with and for people who are sick, as I will be doing this afternoon with one of our older members. And we offer a personal ministry of prayer each week after our 10:30, 2:00 and 7:00 services.

There is, of course, much more we could do. Because we are dispersed across the city we struggle to offer the kind of personal care and visiting that a local community church can provide. We don't have the large numbers of energetic newly retired people who often provide the practical care that suburban churches can offer. I would like to find a way in which we can link our homegroups with individuals in need so that we can offer a better level of care. I would love someone to arise who could take responsibility for our prayer ministry and encourage and develop those involved with it. But in Holy Trinity, having ideas is the easy part, it is much harder to find people with the time and energy to implement them.

Yet my experience of working with God's purposes is that he is able to do much more than we imagine. Jesus first healing miracle, the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, was the beginning of a mission which changed the world. And in many and various ways, that mission continues today in the lives of individuals and communities in ways too numerous to catalogue, but with which many of us here will have had experience.

It isn't always easy and we can expect opposition, just as Jesus did. I read in the newspaper yesterday of a nurse in England, Caroline Petrie, who was suspended from her job by the North Somerset Health Trust. Her offence? Offering to pray for one of her patients. Now if you come from Africa you may find it amazing that here in Europe you can lose your job for offering to pray with someone. But it's true! Apparently she "failed to demonstrate a professional approach to equality and diversity". That is the bizarre and illiberal direction in which equality legislation in some European countries is going. The truth is that many people, whether they have a strong faith or not, find it very comforting to have someone pray with them when they are in real need, provided, of course, that it is done sensitively. Mrs Petrie was doing what she felt her faith encouraged her to do. How sad that she should be disciplined for that! This, though, is a story with a happy ending. Because, after intervention by Christian lawyers, I'm pleased to say that Mrs Petrie was given her job back.

I began by talking about my assignment to a parish which the archdeacon described as weary and tired, with its history of sick incumbents. Well in just 6 years, by the power of the Spirit and with the new vicar doing what he could, that parish became a transformed place. You would have to live there to really appreciate what that meant. But the church discovered energy and resources within it that it didn't realise it had. New leadership arose in the church, people who were tired of their responsibilities found they could hand them on to others, new ways of organising the fellowship were found that helped people care for one another better. The buildings started to feel loved and cared for. Large numbers of children from the local area began attending the church, and all sorts of folk in the community found a sense of new hope and new life through becoming involved in it. In a very real sense lots of individuals and a whole church community received healing. Problems from the past and impossible constraints in the present just seemed to fall away. If a miracle is something that only God can do, then I would describe what happened as miraculous.

The Mission of the Lord in one sense began in the home of Peter's mother-in-law. It has continued through the ages in myriad ways and places. It is something we can all be a part of. For each of us has some possibility for bringing the healing grace of God into the lives of our family and friends. Each of us can be a beacon of light in the groups and communities where we belong. "They will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint", says Isaiah. Well often we feel that we are simply running out of energy and that the demands of life are too great. But as Isaiah reminds us, it is those who wait upon the Lord who will renew their strength. For it is his work, it is his energy that is needed and his Spirit that can bring real healing and real transformation.