

healing & revolution

a sermon preached on the
second sunday before lent

8 February 2015

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by fr david moore, vicar

the lections: Isaiah 40:21-31, Psalm 147:1-11,1 Corinthians 9:16-23, Mark 1:29-39

In a very narrow window between the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle, and the coming Lent-Easter cycle, we get just two 'green Sundays' this year. Though we will read from Mark's gospel next Sunday – the last Sunday before Lent – we will have jumped ahead in the story to chapter nine. This leaves us with just today's one isolated piece of Mark's chapter one.

It's a dramatic chapter. There's a series of rapidly unfolding events immediately following Jesus' baptism and temptation in the wilderness: announcement of the good news in Galilee; call of Simon and Andrew, James and John; entry into the Capernaum synagogue with an astonishingly authoritative teaching and exorcising from unclean spirits; and then today's series of dramatic happenings. An already packed chapter ends with the healing of a leper.

What's going on here? Scholars tend to agree that Mark's narrative is told as though he's in a very great hurry. The historical context is almost palpable behind the text: Rome in the mid 60s is in a heightened state of tension, its minority Christians suffering severe persecution. The spiritual question facing Mark's community has been summarised in this way: 'How do we move through suffering?'¹ In the face of suffering, the good news demands a response.

Astonishingly, the Christian's response to the Emperor's claim to divine power is bound to fuel their suffering – precisely because it is nothing less than revolutionary. Jesus is Lord! This bold claim represents an astonishing leap in human consciousness – breaking completely with all the old markers of tribalism, leaping into the hitherto uncharted territory of individual consciousness, and, ultimately, into a new order of the one-ness of all humankind, transcending all forms of tribalism.

However, this declaration has become so domesticated in Christian piety that we hardly notice that 'Jesus is Lord' is actually a revolutionary claim! It constitutes high treason because it's the claim that Caesar is not Lord. But it's in stark contrast to the incredible reversal under the Emperor Constantine about 260 years later, and which has characterised much of Christianity ever since, Jesus having been conscripted to support feudal and imperial lord's and tribal claims.

When we look further back, historically, behind Mark's community in Rome in the seventh decade of the first century of the Common Era, our focus shifts to the Jesus community of the fourth decade. This is a time of crisis and revolution too. Jesus enters the local centre of religious power and teaching – the synagogue – with a revolutionary new teaching, and an authority that astounds and perplexes, delights and disturbs.²

This 'authority' is in its essence the dawning new humanity – incarnate in a person, in Jesus. A key sign of its dawning in Mark's gospel is miraculous healings and exorcisms. It's important to realise that miraculous healings and exorcisms were not new phenomena in the first century ancient near east, quite commonplace in fact.

¹ See Alexander John Shaia, Michelle L. Gaugy, *Heart and Mind: The Four Gospel Journey for Radical Transformation*, Preston: Mosaic Press, 2013, p125ff

² Mark 1:27

What is new, however, ‘gospel’, is the unmistakable link Jesus makes between these acts of physical liberation and his programme of social, economic and political liberation. Indeed, his healings are always in the service of his programme of social revolution. Whereas in our time church healing activities tend to be focussed on the personal needs of individuals – and which so readily become perverted by institutional marketing tendencies – in the gospels Jesus’ acts of healing are always revolutionary political acts. How does this work?

In touching Peter’s mother-in-law, who is ritually unclean, he challenges the purity codes. In healing on the Sabbath he re-defines the law. And in refusing to be drawn into Simon’s plans for the ancient near east’s equivalent of the ‘successful mega church’ in Capernaum Jesus subverts the deep human lust for power and domination. Whereas today’s mega churches thrive on prosperity doctrine – in the gospels Jesus adopts what the Latin American liberation theologians would later call the ‘preferential the option for the poor’.

Thus, unlike the steady diet of conformity religion which most of us have been fed – focussed on social control, personal moral purity, and status quo prosperity – Jesus’ religion subverts conformity, challenges social control, subordinates personal moral purity, and re-defines ‘prosperity’ according a higher principle. Jesus’ good news is thus truly revolutionary, truly an awakening to the new humanity, the dawning of the Kingdom of God. We have become so accustomed, I suspect, to hearing the expression ‘kingdom of God’ in otherworldly terms – that the realisation that the kingdom and the new humanity are one and the same possibly comes as a surprise.

The implications are both clear and disturbing. The good news of the kingdom does not lie somewhere else – back there, up there, out there – fixated on an historical person who lived 2000 years ago. It’s certainly not located between the pages of a book. The kingdom of God is the new humanity coming to birth in human flesh – yours, mine, all humankind. All persons are to manifest Jesus’ revolution – in acts of healing as political acts; in subverting the purity codes of our time; in transcending all tribal and ethnic boundaries; in practicing the revolutionary art of what has been called Sabbath economics.

Of course, this means the Jesus revolution will always precipitate suffering. Though it’s worth keeping in mind that this is not because Jesus is a spaceman, an extra-terrestrial outside creation. In fact the Jesus revolution is an organic development *within* creation – and as is well known, creation in every form proceeds via the path of suffering, of dying and rising.

So as you and I attempt to embody the Jesus revolution, Mark’s gospel illuminates how we may move though suffering. And while we are always tempted to attempt to concretise both our failures and our successes, Jesus’ shows us that the spiritual revolution does not consist in either building a memorial to the past or attempting to secure our future. Rather, it’s a call into what our tradition calls ‘the sacrament of the present moment’. “Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.”³

vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au