

## The 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2012 – Living the Vision Pt 2

Reading: Mark 1: 40-45

*“St Luke’s is a supportive faith community whose Christ-centred vision lights the way for young and old everywhere, by living out the Gospel.”*

Those who were here a few weeks ago will remember that I said then that this year, as long as I’m here, I’m going to keep bringing us back to our vision statement. For some years we’ve been reflecting and working on who we are and who we believe we are called to be as God’s people in this place, and that work has led us to adopt our vision statement and commit ourselves to becoming a missional community, a mission-shaped church, getting there, though, has been proving a struggle. So I’m taking us back to what we said we were called to become so that we can think more about what that really means and, I pray with passion, take some steps to make it so.

Three weeks ago I began at the end, with living out the gospel, and if you missed that my sermon more or less is on the parish website now. Today I want to keep walking backwards, and spend some time on those words “for young and old everywhere” and again I want to do that through the lens of our gospel reading.

We’re focused on Mark’s gospel this year and even though it feels like we’re a long way into the year we’re only just reaching the end of chapter 1. In today’s reading we get the last of no less than three specific healing stories in that first chapter, all of which happen in the second half of the chapter, and these set the scene for much of Jesus’ ministry to come. Healing is a key theme in Mark and it’s a theme we should back to at some point because, again, it needs a great deal of unpacking, but I’m going to leave that for another day. In this encounter Jesus has been preaching “throughout Galilee” according to the preceding verse and in an unnamed place he meets a man with leprosy, or perhaps one of the many skin conditions that people at that time lumped together under that generic term.

You might recall last time I spoke I talked about Mark as the gospel of now – everything in Mark happens immediately, without delay. Today’s reading features two other characteristics of this earliest of all our canonical gospels.

The first is an aspect of this gospel that I find really helpful – in Mark Jesus makes mistakes, and those mistakes say something crucial about who and what Jesus was.

Mark’s gospel, as we know, is the earliest of the four, written roughly a generation after the events it describes, at a time when the early church was just beginning to grow from infancy to toddler status, complete with the usual growing pains. One of the church’s earliest, harshest and most enduring struggles was over the divinity and humanity of Christ.

The creeds, of course, spell it out; Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, but those creeds were still centuries away when Mark was written and the debates were gathering heat and of central interest in those debates were the earliest accounts of who Jesus was and what he did, and in Mark what we find is a remarkably human Jesus. There’s the Son of God as well of course, but in Mark, much more than the other gospels, Jesus seems to

struggle at times as all of us would struggle, and for me anyway, most significantly, Jesus seems to display that most human of traits when from time to time he gets it wrong.

My favourite example of this is in Mark 7 and the encounter with the Syrophenician woman. In that case Jesus is put right by a woman who according to culture and custom he shouldn't even have been speaking to. In today's reading though he isn't taught by a rebuking supplicant, Jesus learns from harsh experience.

Having healed the leper, Jesus sends him off to the priests to be declared officially clean but he does so with a special instruction: "See that you say nothing to anyone". This happens several times in Mark, Jesus heals someone and tells them to keep it quiet, but in this case it doesn't work. "But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly". The leper blabs and Jesus learns the hard way that he can't rely on people he heals to keep it quiet, and as a result his mission, which needs to be done immediately, is made slower and harder by the presence of the crowds.

There is one other characteristic of Mark's Jesus we see this morning, but we have to look quite hard to find it. In verse 41 this morning we've heard that that Jesus heals the leper because he is "moved with pity". An alternative, and perhaps more accurate, translation though is Jesus was *'moved by anger'*. Why? Is he angry with the man? He could be; this leper is ritually unclean and shouldn't be speaking to or worse, touching any righteous person, let alone one with the status of rabbi. Others though suggest Jesus is angry with the context, with a society that would exclude a person because of his disability. Then just two verses later what we've heard as "After sternly warning him" could alternatively be read "After expressing angry distaste, Jesus sent the leper away".

Jesus gets angry. It happens more than once in Mark – we find a grumpy Jesus expressing anger, possibly at the annoying people who insist on interrupting him, possible with a religious and social system that places some people at the bottom and some at the top, possibly – probably I suspect – at both. In particular though there is a righteous anger that Jesus shows towards anyone or anything that insists on grinding people down.

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I remember the debates when our vision statement was being prepared about those words "*young and old everywhere*". Young and old wasn't too bad, although there's more in that than perhaps we realised, everywhere was more controversial – shouldn't we be focused on Havelock North, let's look after our own backyard first, these are comments we've heard before. In the end the decision of the group – and just a reminder that I was not part of the decision-making process – was that we are called to live out our mission wherever and everywhere God sends us.

Jesus paid a high price for living out his mission. Of course the cross was the highest of all, but there were costs along the way. He too found himself called to bring healing to both young and old – to all ends of the social spectrum. Some of those he worked with were like him, some were very much not. Some would have been people he would have warmed to,

whose company he enjoyed, while some would have made him uncomfortable and he would have found them unpleasant. Young and old, rich and poor, nice and nasty, able and not – in many cases the people Jesus brought light to were those whom his society considered rightfully outcast. You don't spend time with those people, you don't talk to those people, you don't offer anything to those people, they just don't deserve it. And if you go against that warning you pay the price.

What Jesus knew however was that it was a price that had to be paid. Jesus knew that there were people he had to go to because they simply couldn't come to him. That was the problem with the leper blabbing about his healing; suddenly the people had to Jesus because it was just too hard for him to go to them, and that meant some would miss out. The leper, ironically, would have probably been one of those. Jesus goes to him and as a result the leper can go to the Temple. Over and over again in the gospels we find that Jesus goes to where people are, so that they can then find their way to somewhere else.

If this community is to light the way "for young and old everywhere" we too need to find our way to where people are, people like us, and people who aren't, people we like, and people we don't, people who make us happy and people who make us grumpy, and we'll find those people in places where we are comfortable and places we're not, in places on a doorstep, and places further off. And as we go to these people and these places, as we mix with those we're meant to mix with and with those we're not, as we hang out in the right neighbourhoods and the wrong ones, we will pay a price. There will be some, even some among us, who think we're off the mark. There will be those who will question our actions and our motives. There will be quite possibly a backlash by some who come here because it's not there, and join us because we're not them. That's the price we might be called upon to pay to be the people God is calling us to be.

So my prayer is that we pay the price, willingly, joyfully even. My prayer is that we follow our calling no matter what, and that when we encounter resistance and social stigma we get grumpy, we rage against those things, anything, that insist on grinding people down. And most of all my prayer is that we hold fast to our vision, so that we might truly be what we say we are called to become. Thanks be to God.