

JL Sermon Mark 3 vv 7 – 12 21st January 2021

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark.

All Glory to you, O Lord.

Jesus departed with his disciples to the lake, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him; hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon. He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him; for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him. Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, ‘You are the Son of God!’ But he sternly ordered them not to make him known.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

All Praise to you, O Christ.

May I speak in the name of God, Creator of all being, the Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit. Amen

What a strange little text we have today as our Gospel passage. When I first looked it up in the lectionary I was somewhat perplexed. What to say? Basically, the passage says lots of people want to meet Jesus, He realises His popularity has sky rocketed, and so He sorts a boat out, and gets on it, while casting out some demons on the way. And that's about it. Maybe he also starts preaching from the boat, Mark records that he does something similar later on in chapter 4.

I have to confess that my first thoughts went slightly off beam. I couldn't help but wonder how the people at the back of that massive crowd could hear what Jesus was saying without any electronic amplification. With due reverence to my Jewish roots,: you can just imagine the scene ,

‘What did He say?’ ‘What's he saying?’ ‘Blessed be the what?’ ‘Blessed be the meat? ‘The meat?? what's he talking about, the meat of course it's blessed! it's good kosher meat I'm a good Jewish boy of course it's blessed! Anyway what's he talking about meat for? He's on a fishing boat! Oh oh blessed are the meek, oh yes that would make more sense. Now what? hunger and thirst for nice chewiness? Is he talking about meat again? Of course we like a nice bit of tender meat, no one likes it overcooked... ohh not nice chewiness, righteousness that makes more sense. I better stop with this frivolity now and leave the rest to a Wednesday night drinks party.

Having got that out of my system, my next challenge is the fact we've had two excellent sermons on much the same subject matter over the past week. If you haven't heard them, I strongly recommend that you give them a listen from the website. On Sunday, Rebecca focused on how we should respond to the invitation to ‘Come and See Jesus’, albeit that her Gospel text was drawn from the beginning of John. Last Thursday, Hugh highlighted the fact the root of Jesus's rock star popularity in today's passage was the fact that the leper He had healed – those beautiful words ‘ filled with compassion... Jesus said to him ‘I DO choose’ – that leper had disobeyed Jesus' express commandment not to tell anyone about this healing miracle.

Hugh went to point out the breakneck speed with which Mark chronicles Jesus's public ministry. So from Mark's opening words of ‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ’ to this little passage we have :

- Been introduced to John the Baptist
- Seen the Baptism of Jesus, and His subsequent affirmation from God

- Heard about Jesus's temptation in the wilderness
- The calling of the first disciples
- Jesus's astonishing teaching in His Synagogue, with authority even over demons
- The healing of Peter's mother-in-law, the follow on of which has enraged those seeking gender equality ever since; 'the fever left her and immediately she began to serve them'!
- Jesus trying to find a quiet place to pray but being chased down by his disciples, leading to the start of his itinerant ministry
- The aforementioned cleansing of the man with leprosy
- The healing of man lowered down through the roof, preceded by Jesus implying that He has authority to forgive sins
- The calling of Levi and the criticism levelled at Jesus for eating with Tax collectors and prostitutes
- Some revolutionary teaching about who the Gospel is for, the value of rituals in the law and the nature of the Sabbath
- As well as the start of the plot by the Pharisees to rid themselves of Jesus

Phew!! It's no wonder then that we get to this little interlude, we, like Jesus, and also the author Mark feel the need to draw breath!

So, what to say? Well having faffed about with excuses that this is too obscure a little passage to preach on (especially for a novice like me), it seems to me that there are three areas that we could focus on :

- The understanding that Jesus has of His need to protect His physical, mental and spiritual well being in order to progress His ministry
- The fact that the unclean spirits (rather than the Pharisees and teachers of the law) proclaim who Jesus really is
- The overwhelming response of the people to 'Come and See'

It's this last point that I'd like us to reflect upon, building on what both Hugh and Rebecca have already spoken about. The fact that so many from all over were flocking to meet Jesus should be no surprise; It wasn't just that He was performing amazing miracles of healing. I feel sure that the crowds were also excited by the fact that He was engaging with the whole spectrum of society, He didn't shun those that would be deemed outcasts, He wasn't distant but present in the midst of the people, that His teaching was fresh and thought provoking and that He saw the law as an enabler to wholeness and true freedom, and not a crushing burden. I'm sure that the crowds also loved the fact that He was happy to challenge hypocrisy and hard heartedness in the religious establishment.

Last night, I attended one of the launch events for the Diocese's 'Come and See' initiative. As part of this, we, as a Benefice are being encouraged to engage with and prayerfully support a series of events in the run up and through Lent designed for those who are seeking faith, as well as those who want to deepen their faith in the Good News of Jesus Christ. We'll hear more of this in the coming days and weeks, but for now its set me thinking, if someone were to answer the call to 'Come and See' by attending one of our services – so relatively easy and unthreatening in these days of Zoom services, what would they find? How much of the Jesus that attracted all those crowds to the shores of Lake Galilee would they see in what we offer?

Having posed this question, it would be so easy for us to tie ourselves up in knots of introspection, succumbing to a typical British trait of self flagellation – this isn't good enough, or that isn't

accessible enough, and how is it that we're not seeing the same response as those who flocked to see Jesus as in this Gospel passage?

While we should never be complacent about what we offer, as there is always room for improvement, I don't think to lambast ourselves in this way is particularly constructive, not least because It's God who does the prompting and revealing, not us, and we don't know what phrase, or response or action will prompt a moment of revelation in someone's heart. So maybe we need to rephrase this question and ask. 'What would we **hope** for, if someone responded to the call to come and see, and what's our role in making that happen?'

Some questions to reflect on, irrespective of what we actually end up doing as part of this initiative. I was really heartened last night that Bishop Steven encouraged us to listen, to be sensitive to those who are being prompted to search, and to especially to pray. This is not going to be an aggressive initiative where we try to force the Gospel down people's throats, but an opportunity to walk alongside those in whom God is working, meeting them where they are, and supporting them as they explore, with love, openness and prayer. So that's our role.

And what about what we hope for? Maybe lots of things, but at the core our hope would be that anyone seeking, dipping their toe into faith, that they would begin to know how deeply, fully, extravagantly they are loved by that man in the boat.

Amen