

## Sermon 14.1.2021. Mark 1

In the first chapter of Mark it all goes so well. John the Baptist preparing the way, proclaiming the more powerful one who is coming after him who will baptise with the Holy Spirit; the baptism of Jesus. The dove descending. You are my Son the Beloved. Jesus *driven* into the wilderness by the Spirit to be *tempted* among the *wild* beasts, but that's all right because it's the Spirit's doing (the wilderness is where alone with nature and with God you learn, discern, grow) - and the angels minister to Jesus. Jesus taking up John's call to repentance and speaking of the nearness of the kingdom of God. Jesus summoning disciples who join him immediately (immediately, *euthus* a favourite word of Mark's). Jesus teaching in the synagogue and astounding people with his authority. Jesus casting out a demon and successfully, it seems commanding the demon's silence as it begins to speak of who Jesus is. Jesus' fame spread, nevertheless at once (*euthus*, that word again) by the human witnesses. More healings, more demons cast out and bound to silence. Jesus alone at prayer, no doubt renewing his strength, discovered by his disciples who want him to do more of the same. Which he does willingly, going wider, throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message and exorcising. It's a wonderful whirl of wonder-working. All good, all very good.

And then today's passage from Mark 1: The leper showing simple and exemplary faith in Jesus' power to change his broken life, if he wishes. Jesus' pitying response – he is gutted, that splanknidzomai verb indicating deep visceral emotion - , his instinctive, it seems, reaching out to touch uncleanness, his desire to cleanse, his speaking the words that accomplish the cleansing, just two words in the Greek, so swiftly (typical Mark) is it done: *thelo*, *katharistheti*; I wish, be cleansed; Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. This is profoundly moving and very wonderful, and then the leper, now able to return to the community from which his leprosy has exiled him – no more social distancing needed now – the leper proclaiming freely, spreading the news. This too, this enthusiastic proclamation, is wonderful, too, isn't it? And doesn't this whole sequence indicate the way it should be between Christ and us, with us 'lepers' too, we who know we are damaged, we who know we lack the fullness of life Christ offers, turning to him for our healing, finding new life, going out and proclaiming what has happened to us and what, therefore can happen to others in the turn to Christ? Isn't this what one of our own told us at Ross' last service at Epiphany, the Feast of the manifestation of God in Christ to the peoples? Listen...

[ recording of part of the Epiphany Service - Joanna C acknowledging an unsatisfactoriness in herself ameliorated by an encounter with Christ which had her proclaiming Christ with 'annoying' enthusiasm]

And would one could stop there. Perhaps I should...

But no: because I've missed something out between the leper's purification and his proclamation. It's this: After sternly warning him Jesus sent him away at once, saying to him, 'See that you say nothing to anyone;' Sternly warning: the leper's silence matters to him. And then a big BUT - a big but, in fact to the whole of the preceding narrative, filled as it is with breathless success. ' BUT he (the leper) went out and began to proclaim it freely,

and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly. Though Jesus can shut up the demons easily enough he can't shut the leper up. He fails, in fact, fails to get what he wants. And *this* failure leads to further incapacity. The leper's spreading the news of his healing means that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly. There seems to be an irony lurking here. The cleansed leper can go and show himself to the priest back in the community whilst Jesus is now excluded from towns, like an unclean leper – and indeed his visceral pity for the leper has led to a physical contact with uncleanness that presumably renders Jesus ritually unclean.

Now Jesus' having to remain out in the country, doesn't stop his mission in its tracks – people come to him from every quarter and at the beginning of chapter two he is back in Capernaum and the miracles and the summoning to ministry continue. What's very different in chapter two, though, is that opposition to Jesus makes itself increasingly apparent. Jesus' fame, to which the leper's disobedient proclamation has contributed, catches the interest and the hostility of the scribes and the pharisees, and then in a relatively short space of time – and just 35 verses counting from the last verse of chapter one, verse 45, where the big BUT occurs – there comes this, following another healing miracle: The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him – how to destroy him. We have come a long way from the success and acclamation of Chapter 1.

The way the uncontrolled spread of his reputation will generate a lethal hostility to him among the powerful may be something Jesus anticipates and that this provides the reason for his perhaps rather surprising desire to stop the demons and the leper talking about him publicly and freely. That desire is very evident, particularly in Mark. It may be that Jesus is aware of the possibility that his mission will be cut short before it can really take root and have a lasting effect, if the proclamation of his name annoys the authorities enough. It may be that Jesus senses that his celebrity status is likely to obstruct authentic personal encounter with him; it may be that he fears his message and what he stands for will be distorted if his fame spreads like wild-fire. One way or another, proclamation could imperil rather than advance the reception of Jesus and his message.

I think that remains a risk. Of course, we are not now to keep silent about Jesus but our proclamation can imperil rather than promote the cause of Christ. Probably always, we as individuals, we as churches, we as the church universal on earth could proclaim Christ better. The disunified proclamation of the Church of England at this time, certainly, appears to dishonour Christ's wishes.

And yet – I still want to celebrate the disobedience of the leper, his movement from simple faithful brokenness to proclamation that is, more complexly, both faithful and a breach of faith. I take the leper's proclamation to be an essentially irrepressible reflex outburst of gratitude and joy. If he is doing wrong, he is doing it for the right reasons.

And furthermore, his doing it leaves us at the beginning of the first chapter of the Gospel, with a picture of Jesus, unclean, disobeyed, open to failure, and excluded that adumbrates in little the Gospel's whole proclamation of who Jesus is, the Jesus in whom God loves human beings with a love that respects their right to go astray, to choose wrongly, to disobey, a love that hands God over into the hands and the decision-making of sinful human

beings, a love that, in a sacrificial solidarity with those sinful human beings, leads to the crucifixion outside the city.

And furthermore still, this first human disobedience in Mark's Gospel, perhaps standing for all human disobedience, and seemingly taking the narrative in a direction that Jesus did not intend, is part of what causes that most appalling event that is also the most wonderful event, the event that secures our salvation, the event that reveals the depths of God's love for us, the appalling event we cannot wish not to have happened, even could the kingdom of God been opened to us without it. In this, the disobedient leper may remind us of man's *first* disobedience and of the way in which the Fall can – should - be construed as a *felix culpa*, a fortunate fault which sets in train all that God does for us in Christ. Blessed be the time the apple taken was. In God's economy, wrong directions lead to a more glorious destination and by a paradoxical reverse alchemy the base metal, the dross of sin is reincorporated into the gold of God's perfect ambition for his creation, to make that gold of a higher carat still.

And so it is ours, acknowledging our damagedness, our sinfulness, to come to Christ for healing, for richer life – and then to issue our grateful, enthusiastic, faulty proclamations to the world, trusting that their even their flawedness can be used by Christ to shape his consummation of the fullest and richest of possible destinies for his creation.

Blessed be the time the leper spoke of Christ. Amen.