

Church of the Resurrection
Sermon, 4 Feb 24
Rev Charles Potter

Mark 1.29-39

29 As soon as they^[a] left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. **30** Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. **31** He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

32 That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. **33** And the whole city was gathered around the door. **34** And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. **36** And Simon and his companions hunted for him. **37** When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' **38** He answered, '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.' **39** And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

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In the gospels, Jesus is the subject of every sentence. He calls, he heals, he teaches, and he makes decisions about the direction of his ministry. He is in control of all that takes place. It is only at his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane that he yields control to others and he becomes the object.

In today's gospel, Jesus exerts his control: he leaves everyone behind and goes to pray by himself. Then he decides to move on, for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Simon, the other disciples and village people were several kilometres behind him. For them, it wasn't time for prayer, it was time for action, building on what had happened the night before.

Imagine the other things Simon and his companions might have said when they found Jesus that early morning praying: 'What are you doing? Isn't the afternoon prayer meeting good enough? Are we second class believers because we don't get up early and pray? And what about the opportunities opening up from last night with all those people? Just imagine the Jesus of Nazareth Preaching and Healing Mission we could build here. They wanted to use Jesus for their own purposes.

Two things about this:

I wonder if we sometimes think there are grades of Christians. Say, ranging from Category E for 'terribly ordinary plodders', to Category A+ for 'super-duper terribly enlightened near-to-God' people? I reckon I'm a plodder. There have been wonderful Christians I have known, around whom I have felt very much like a total heathen.

Secondly, of course we long for the success of our church, as a healing presence in people's lives.

Do we ever long for greatness for our church? I confess I have regularly in the course of my ministry. It is an easy kind of thinking to fall into. And it may or may not be for the kingdom of God.

Reflecting on this incident from the personal spiritual life of Jesus can be helpful. We read in Mark that he had had a long day. It had begun with Jesus and his disciples going into the synagogue in Capernaum on the Sabbath, where he stood up and taught the people. Anyone who has been a teacher will know that being on your feet is demanding of personal energy. If you are doing it well, you are giving something of yourself along with the subject matter.

To top it off for Jesus, he was heckled by someone in the crowd who was possessed, or as we might say, was mentally unstable. That man was healed, nevertheless the whole situation must have been emotionally draining for Jesus. If we allow him to be truly human, of course.

Then Jesus went to the home of Simon's mother-in-law. Jesus may have been expecting to put his feet up, but the lady was in bed with a fever. Jesus was called upon to do a sick visit and to pray for her. She was healed, in the wonderful way God heals. Mark says she was restored to her place in the household, and served Jesus and his mates. And let this be no reflection on the place of women. We have grown in wisdom about equality in our time. It is part of all the truth we have been promised we would be led into.

News must have got round the village. That evening, the natural time for most of us to rest after a long day, everyone turned out to see Jesus. They brought all the sick people to him. He must have gone to bed rather late. I can imagine him thinking: please let me be alone. I want time to unwind.

This very full day described by Mark is likely a sample drawn from many days that were like that for Jesus. Living such a demanding workload, he turned to the one source on which he knew he could depend, his heavenly Father. He didn't just do this as a demonstration for his disciples; he did it as well, if not primarily, for himself. Keeping close to his Father was the root and branch of his life. His need of prayer shows his true humanity.

Prayer can be like any other form of meditation, taking away the stress. It also has the positive effect of drawing something in, the strength of God. Or better, being aware of the Holy Spirit who was within us all the time, and we were not listening. As the prophet Isaiah wrote,

they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.

Isaiah is not giving us permission to never stop because we've got God with us. He is describing the prayer of stillness without words, listening to the heart, where the Lord has promised to dwell.

Luke tells us that

'Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.'

There are only 3 places in Mark's gospel where he tells us about this pattern: here, after the eventful day and night in Capernaum; the night before they crossed the lake for his first visit to Bethsaida; and in the garden of Gethsemane. They are three occasions of his affirming his next steps as the obedient Son.

So what was Jesus praying about that early morning outside Capernaum? It could have been a 'give me strength' kind of prayer. But it could have been a choice affecting his messiahship: should he stay and be a fantastic vicar for the town? Or should his focus be the spread of the good news as widely as possible? Have we ever been lured by present glory in exchange for the kingdom of God?

Can we imagine what it may be like when Jesus prays to his Father? God talking to God. And yet it is also Father talking to Son. Now maybe that is a metaphor, but it is what we have been given. There is a separation between them, and at the same time there is a unity, a oneness that we cannot conceive. Which gives us the belief of the church about the nature of Christ, and distinct persons, but one God.

What about when we pray? Incredibly, St Paul tells us it is the same thing, God talking to God. But of course there is a very real differentiation between us and God:

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.
Rm 8.26

Does this mean that when I pray to Christ and God I pray to myself? Yes, because my prayer changes me. I found someone else who wrote: 'prayer does not change God's purpose, it releases it ... [it is] the key that unlocks the forces of good in the world.'

And no, I am not praying to myself, because I'm focusing my thoughts on the absolute, mysterious other. Somewhere in all of that, the Holy Spirit makes the bluetooth connection I'm hoping for.

So to come back to the question of whether there are grades of Christians: with Jesus as our model, there must be those who know their need of God more than others. They are aware of what's on offer and where you can get it, as Jesus was.

The other thing that may keep us from prayer is, paradoxically, our need to accomplish something. The disciples and the crowd thought they were on a winner with Jesus. He didn't see it that way. He saw beyond immediate success to the greater goal. Jesus was planning for eternity. We also need to plan and live with eternity in mind, the eternity of this moment and the eternity of a life spent with the Lord.

Jesus knew where he needed to turn, when the affairs of life pressed in on him from all sides. The same loving God beckons, disturbs, invites, even teases us to search and ask for more. Seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. We need not wait until we run dry with our own resources.

A takeaway question: If you went out to a deserted place early tomorrow morning, what would you pray for? What one thing do you need from God? Is there anything holding you back from asking for it?