

Hope & Healing

There's a problem we often experience when we hear miracle stories, and that problem, I think, is summed up in two different responses that seem all too common. Some people want to dismiss the story as just being made up. This approach can be justified by the lack of miracles today (or their explanation by science where they do occur). It is also quite rightly questioned by the fairness of a god who would randomly heal some people where greater need is ignored. It raises the issue of the capriciousness of a god who would heal one person who has "enough" prayers but not another who perhaps has less support from no fault of their own.

The opposite response to miracles is to say they are literal events that happened as they were recorded. Ignoring the one argument for this approach that says the Bible said it, so it must have happened as described, there are other (and may I say better) arguments for this position. They would say that to deny the miracles happened denies the power of God as well as God's care for the world in which we live.

Both of these extremes – and I must add I have summarised the arguments on both sides and they certainly can be and are more nuanced than this – miss the more important question. The miracle stories – like all the stories in the Gospels (and might I add in other parts of the Bible too – are included to tell us something important about who Jesus is.

What do these stories tell us about Jesus? Have a think about that question while you hear the reading. I've extended it slightly – last week's Gospel reading needs to be included and so does the next story in this chapter. Of course, the early church would have heard the whole Gospel in one sitting, so the context of other stories would help build their understanding of each story. In this case, I don't think the divisions in the lectionary reading are helpful, hence adding a few verses on either side of what we will hear today. I'll allow a little time after for responses to that question: When you hear these stories together (as a whole) what do they tell you about Jesus?

Mark 1:21-45

The main reason I did not think the break between the lectionary readings was particularly helpful is because the first story, set in the Synagogue, sets up this group of stories. Do you remember the response of the "unclean spirits" when they are cast out? *They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! (v 27).* We see something like it at the end of this cluster: Jesus tells the leper to see the priests, as was required by the Torah. The middle three stories move from the home, to the local community, to the whole area. This authority identified in the first story is not limited to a single family or a local community; it is to be shared between all people.

This response in the face of hurting would have been important for Mark's community. Last year while talking about the Gospel of Matthew, I mentioned on a few occasions that it was written in the aftermath of the Siege of Jerusalem. The Gospel of Mark was written in the lead up to this horrific event. If the siege was not occurring at the time, it was certainly at the point where tensions were rising and people would have simply known that something was going to happen. There were skirmishes with the Romans and brutal reprisals in Jewish towns for quite a few years before the siege began. It was obvious that something bad would be happening and the future was uncertain.

Into this situation, we have Jesus being depicted as having authority over all the powers. If that includes the “unclean spirits” or what was understood in the day as “demonic powers” then that certainly included the Romans! His teaching was not like what they were hearing from the Jewish leaders and this was important because the rebellion was led by messianic figures. The Christians were unable to side with either group and Jesus is depicted as doing the same.

However, there is also a point behind the timing of the healings. Two healings take place on the Sabbath when they could have easily waited a few hours later. As other Gospels state more explicitly, I think this is a reminder the Sabbath is made for people not the other way around. It is not about simply dismissing tradition as tradition, but rather reflecting on whether the tradition is still helpful. Sometimes our traditions get in the way of other people’s relationship with God, and we need to then ask ourselves (and ask God) how to respond.

I think there is also a third point in this compilation and that is about the movement that is particularly evident in the three stories that make up today’s lectionary reading. We see the movement from an individual who has a relationship with Jesus (Simon’s mother-in-law), out to the whole community, and then beyond. It reminds us both that God is not limited to us and our community, as well as calling us to connect beyond our typical groups.

One final question that I think is important to consider when we think about this reading with this framework, is what does healing look like when we take the concept metaphorically? One story shows illness getting in the way of taking on roles of value, another has person with a disease that according to the Torah mandates exclusion from the community. The healing required was not simply about physical or mental health, although that is part of it, but rather the impact this has on people and their communities. Healing is required where people are no longer valued and where they are excluded from community, but the healing is not necessarily for the individual – it is about the relationships.

And so we have explored a different way of looking at these stories, what they tell us about Jesus, and what they meant for the healing of relationships in a community facing troubling times. I wonder what might they say for how we work towards healing in our community today?