

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: September 16<sup>th</sup> 2019: St Mark Chapter 1 verses 14-45

Content: The imprisonment of John; the beginning of the ministry of Jesus; recruitment of the first four disciples (fishermen); synagogue preaching; the first healing; healing of Peter's mother-in-law; crowds flock for healing; Jesus' prayer as a back-up for an exhausting ministry; healing of a leper, and more crowd demands.

### Some Background

Gospel good news is about certain knowledge regarding the nature of God, hope for those without hope, victory over the badness to which we all prone, God wishing us well not ill, immortality/salvation. We are called to repentance: which is not feeling sorry for ourselves because our sins have hurt us, but is hating sin because it is sin and trying to turn our backs on it.

Fishermen were ordinary but important. The people of the time ate very little meat, but a great deal of (mainly dried) fish. Part of the opposition to Jesus was that he was a tradesman and his followers were working people, not respected Bible scholars. Jesus recognised potential... He sees in us more than we see in ourselves.

The synagogue was primarily a learning and teaching place, but without an established teacher. The leader could invite anyone he thought suitable to preach. (As far as we know, it was always men inviting men: the female leadership in the early Christian Church was something else!) Incidentally, the synagogue was also a food bank for the poor and hungry. Interesting comparison with today's churches – I'm not sure how far the congregation on Sunday mornings goes to learn? We would all be a bit taken aback if the Churchwardens chose a preacher from the congregation.... as would be the person chosen, and maybe the bishop. The "scribes" were Bible students who turned the all-important Law into detailed rules and regulations; never claiming to be original. The scribes said "It says here". Jesus said "I say". Hence the surprise: pleasant surprise for some; painful shock for others.

We struggle with the concept of "unclean spirits". At that time, they were a norm: thousands of them, male and female and procreating more evil spirits. Different evil spirits for different diseases, disabilities. Skeletons dug up with holes bored in the skull (while the person was still alive) to let the spirit out show just how seriously they were taken. There were elaborate routines prescribed for healings and used by healers. Jesus' approach was usually radically simple. We don't know for certain whether Jesus, in "casting out evil spirits" was being described in contemporary terms although he didn't see things that way himself, or working within a belief system that as a man of his own times he shared, or simply recognising that his real healing could only be experienced by his contemporaries if they heard that the evil spirit had gone. The same is true of the Jesus healings linked with the forgiveness of sins: some of those he healed may actually have been burdened by sin reflected in their "illness". Others may have needed to hear the word "Forgiven" because

they blamed themselves for their problems even though sin had nothing to do with it. Perhaps more, had a sin problem and a health problem, although the two were not related.

We hear nothing of Peter's wife, just his mother-in-law. Since the mother-in-law seems to be looking after Peter, maybe the wife was dead. The healed to serve message gets a mixed reception these days – partly because of perceived sexist overtones. BUT, (a) we do need to use our health to serve (no shame in service, as Jesus showed!), and (b) sick/disabled people do welcome the opportunity to be useful and not always and only be at the receiving end of help.

We can't blame people for flocking to Jesus to be healed. No GPs, no A & E departments, not dial-up health service. But there is a warning here against turning to God only when we "need" Him. We need Him all the time. The Jesus prayer time says it all. If Jesus sacrificed sleep to pray, we ought to be able to find/make time. The Jesus balance of teaching and healing says something about our Christian responsibilities, collectively and individually.

There are three types of actual leprosy, all pretty horrible and isolating, In addition, Mark includes psoriasis and other less awful conditions. Not quite the same, but in thinking Jesus and the leper, think Princess Diana and the man with Aids. (St Francis adopted the Jesus approach to the leper he met: turning revulsion into embracing. This was at a time when some churches had a leper slit in the wall so that the leper could see into the church without encountering the congregation. Uglier still, the priest read the prayers for the dead over the leper: a real example of the living dead.)

Questions: *If God calls us, as well as "them", what is He calling us to? Why do we go to church? What was it like for John, the man of the open spaces and the crowd-puller, to be locked in a dungeon (with only Herod as a visitor)?*