

Isaiah 40:21 - 31
Psalms 147
1 Corinthians 9:16 - 23
Mark 1: 29 - 39

Those who look to the Lord will win new strength

In the early years of the 20th Century various churches turned their attentions to ministry in the Australian outback. We know well the story of John Flynn and the Australian Inland Mission, which sought to establish a mantle of safety for people living in the bush. The Anglican equivalent was the establishment of Bush Brotherhoods - communities of temporarily celibate men who, working in teams from a series of 'mother houses', offered ministry to the outback. The stories are of constant struggle to minister in the bleakest of landscapes; a desperate and demanding environment where people were few and often severely limited in their resources. Bringing the healing presence of the Gospel was a costly business. There were many losses but there were moments when healing and life broke through. There is a story from the Anglican Brotherhoods about a Brother who ministered near the NSW/QLD border. On one occasion he came upon a shed out in the wilderness where he encountered a surly, taciturn settler. The Brother was eventually able to make it clear who he was and what he represented. At once the man's attitude changed. He took the Brother in to meet his wife who was nursing a desperately sick child. The mother said she had been praying all day for a minister to Baptize her child before he died. The Brother Baptized the child, laid hands on him and offered prayers for healing, and went on his way. The next day as he passed that place the child was outside playing under a tree.

The beginning of Mark includes stories just like this. Jesus' entry into Capernaum, a territory over the border, is accompanied by the casting out demons, healing and the relief of suffering. This happens after the pivotal announcement that the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near. The Good News Mark proclaims is embodied in the ministry of Jesus. He is the Holy One of God who is not dependent on his own strength, or whether people receive him or not. The sovereignty he proclaims reaches beyond and below the limits of human awareness and control. He demonstrates what it means when the energy of God - the energy that gives life - is released amongst us. Last week and this we have heard stories of people who were liberated from the powers that held them in bondage. People were detoxified and set free from their obsessions. We should see this as healing but it means more than that. They found their lives returned to a proper balance, enabling them to take their place in community once more. Mark does not give us a magical recipe for healing everyday illnesses. He witnesses to the deepest thing: God who moves towards the world in grace and mercy to identify with us in our frailty and weakness. Healing is a sign that some were touched by the presence of that blessing, but it was not only the absence of the disease that witnessed to this. The sign God was present and at work in their lives was the restoration of relationship - their return to a place in community.

The Lord builds up Jerusalem

and gathers together the outcasts of Israel.
He heals the broken hearted
and binds up their wounds. [Ps 147:2-3]

The Psalm today is a Doxology - a hymn of praise to a restoring God who liberated the people from exile in Babylon and brought them together again in community and faith. It is a Hymn of praise and delight in God whose strength is greater than all human and earthly power, and who seeks the faith and worship of the people. [God]

takes no pleasure in the power of a horse,
no delight in human strength;
But the Lord delights in those who fear him ,
who put their trust in his steadfast love.

The Psalm is an excellent commentary on the Gospel and a perfect companion for the reading from Isaiah who responds to the feelings of weakness, hopelessness and lack of faith in the exiles. The people had fallen into thinking God had forgotten them - "Why do you say, My way is hidden from the Lord?" Isaiah asked. His task was to revive their faith and hope. He sought to overcome their paralysis and despair by pointing them away from themselves to God, the source of true life and strength who was coming to liberate them. Uncomplimentary comparisons are made with all forms of earthly and human power and then he asks: "To whom can we compare God?" The people must comprehend that real strength can only come through waiting on God. Turning towards and trusting in the one who is the source of all life and whose grace sets us free. The last verses are a beautiful and lofty vision which lift from our shoulders the burden of doing it for ourselves:

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

Those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength. The Gospel tells us that the victory of God went forth in Jesus. In him the life giving power of God entered a desperate and demanding environment where people were often stuck, lost, severely limited in their resources. Because of him strength came to those who were waiting, and even sometimes to those who were not, for God is a restoring God, who chose to move towards the world mercy and lift us up.

The three stories in the reading from Mark today are all different. Simon's Mother in Law is healed, and restored to her role in the family. Then the crowds sought Jesus in droves because of what they had heard about his healing power. In the third story Jesus went off to pray. It is significant that when the disciples found him and challenged him to return to the healing ministry, he did not. Healing as such was not the real focus of his work. It was an accompanying **sign** of the presence of the Kingdom, which he was called to announce. The ministry he was intent on continuing was spreading the news of the nearness of the Kingdom so that people would turn from what they were doing and again wait on God. The third story shows that whatever activism and healing Jesus engaged in in the world went hand in hand

with, and was a product of his openness to prayer. And as the story unfolds we see one who continued, himself to wait on God in the bleakest of landscapes, Gethsemane and the Cross. Truly he entered fully into our sickness, in order to show us the way to life.

When the churches sought to minister in the outback it was not for the sake of curing illnesses. It was because they had been waiting on God and were responding to what who God is for us. The churches went in the power of gifts and strengths not their own. They sought to embody God's restoring love in those far off places that people might see and know God's will for their lives, and receive the signs of grace and blessing. As we reflect on our call to participate in the Mission of God. As we make plans for the year ahead and hold Annual General Meetings for the Congregation and the Mission, it is worth remembering that the healing God gave us in Jesus Christ was the restoration of right relationships amongst all people. This is the healing God seeks for us, and seeks to see embodied in the world by the church. The restoration of right relationships - how we long to see this in the world today, in our communities, and in our church. It can happen, if people hear the Gospel, and give themselves afresh to live in the strength of our restoring God.