

Yesterday, today, and forever

A story found in the gospel of Mark has been one of my favourites for 28 years. How can I be so precise about the length of time? Well, the week before Easter, during my first year of training at theological college, I went to Northampton with about 20 other students to take part in a mission, led by Michael Green, a leader and teacher of international repute. Some weeks before that, we were due to visit churches to help them prepare for our coming. Some students, much more experienced than me, had been selected to preach at Sunday services in churches across the town. Two of these preachers dropped out, replacements were needed, and I found myself volunteering to fill one of the gaps even though I had never preached before. Later I discovered that the publicity sent to the unsuspecting churches in Northampton promised “an experienced and well-trained team of preachers and teachers”. Have you ever regretted being too bold in putting yourself forward for something without really thinking it through?

Some weeks later I found myself at St. John’s Church, Kingsdown, preaching my first sermon based on Mark 2:1-12. The members of the congregation were very kind and supportive and I ended up spending a great deal of time with them during the week of the mission itself. The story in Mark turned out to be perfect for the occasion and one that fascinated me when I studied it at length.

A man is paralyzed. Some concerned friends had heard that Jesus was healing people, so they carried their friend on a mat to Capernaum, the village where Jesus was teaching that day. The house was chock-a-block full of people, and there were more crowded outside. Undeterred, the men carried their friend up the steps on the side of the house and on to the flat roof. And then they dug right through the roof of the house. Imagine the noise, the mess, and the damage! Then the man was lowered through the hole his friends had made right down to where Jesus was. Jesus was so impressed by the faith the man’s friends had shown, he immediately pronounced forgiveness for him and healed him of his infirmity. The healed man got up at Jesus command, took up the mat he would no longer need, and left the house.

Christians like me love to see how people are changed, and how their lives are changed, when they come into God’s presence in church, or wherever we meet. The four friends of the paralyzed man were doing the work of mission simply by bringing their friend into the presence of Jesus. We believe that Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8) and we know that he is with us in the person of the Holy Spirit and that he is still changing lives today. Whenever I talk about mission in church, I always say that our task is simply to invite people into the presence of Jesus – he makes himself known and will bless anyone who is prepared to receive him.

Here in a nutshell is the mission of the Christian Church - to invite, to bring, and to encourage people to encounter God through Jesus and in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

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