

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 14th February 2020

Mark 1: 29 - 39

They are two healing miracles that couldn't be more different.

In the verses immediately preceding the ones we read this morning from the Gospel of Mark the verses that we looked at last week, there is a story of Jesus healing a man with an unclean spirit on the Sabbath.

That healing miracle was a spiritual battle fought with words in public. This morning we read that immediately after this spiritual battle in the synagogue, still on the Sabbath, Jesus went into Simon's house and again healed, this time he healed Simon's mother-in-law who had a fever.

Two successful healings, but completely different from one another. In the first there is a vociferous, public, spiritual battle. In the second there is no suggestion of a battle, no words are used, and it takes place in a private, domestic setting.

They are both healings, but they are completely different. It is the second, the healing of Simon's mother-in-law that is unusual. Usually, in the Gospel of Mark, we hear about the duration of the illness. Usually, we hear a word of healing spoken by Jesus. Usually, there is some kind of expression of faith from the recipient. Usually, there is a response of amazement from the crowd. These are features of the previous healing miracle, which took place in the synagogue, and they are features of most others. But, they don't appear in the healing of Simon's mother-in-law.

Rather than a typical healing narrative that is told as a story with a theological point, the healing of Simon's mother-in-law reads more like a report of a remembered event with little literary or theological elaboration. Because of this, I think that the healing of Simon's mother-in-law has a sense of something very genuine about it.

Jesus really did go to Simon's house. His mother-in-law really did have a fever. Jesus really did take her by the hand, and after he did so she felt better. To me, the report of this event shines a light into the domestic life around Jesus, which we don't usually see amidst the theological and social drama that surrounds his words and actions elsewhere in the Gospel.

This event reminds me a little of a TV program I have been watching on Channel 4 over the past couple of weeks called *It's a Sin*. *It's a Sin* is still available to watch. It is a five-part drama about the AIDS pandemic in the 1980s and 90s. It follows the lives of a group of young, late teenage, flatmates living in London over the course of a decade between 1981 and 1991. The drama follows them from their carefree years through to the darkness and trauma of what the gay community in the UK experienced back then as a consequence of AIDS.

One by one these flatmates have to leave the bright lights, fast living, and fabulous fun of London and return home to where they were brought up in a village in Wales, or brooding Glasgow, or suburban Isle of Whyte to be cared for by their parents, and to die. Part of the drama is contained in the hope of a miracle cure that might save these young people. Of course, a miracle cure never comes; back then AIDS was a death sentence.

The healing of Simon's mother-in-law at home, and the experience of young men returning home to die in the TV programme couldn't be more different in that respect. But, in other ways they are very similar.

As we read on in the Gospel of Mark, we discover that Jesus' healings weren't just medical miracles they were accompanied by other things as well. As he healed, he also drove out demons and proclaimed a message, because - as he said in verse 38 of our reading - '... that is what I came to do'.

To put it another way, Jesus healed and taught together; for him, healing and teaching were inseparable. In the 1980s and the 1990s healing and teaching were inseparable as well. Whatever happened behind the closed doors of their parents' houses when these young men came home to die, whatever compassion was shown or judgement laid down, what is for certain is that their lives and their deaths were governed by ignorance.

The deaths of those young men were governed by ignorance about AIDS; what it was, how it could be caught, and how it could be treated. Their deaths were also governed by the ignorance because of the disinterest that our 1980s culture showed in teaching those most at risk about AIDS, because those most at risk were gay.

It wasn't just the deaths of those young men that were governed by ignorance, their lives were also. Their lives were governed by the ignorance of other people. As probably happened in so many cases, in *It's a Sin* parents only find out that their sons are gay once they have full blown AIDS, even though the fact that they were gay couldn't have been more obvious to them for years. For their part, sons could never tell their parents that they were gay because they lived in an ignorant society in which no one wanted to know about gay people, gay lifestyles, and - it turned out - a virus that was rife amongst the gay community. As a result, the ignorance that accompanied the outbreak of the pandemic, which was a disaster, made the pandemic a tragedy, and many lives were lost that could have been saved.

I remember those days. When I first joined the church in 1992, I remember an after-service chat over coffee with the Session Clerk of the congregation I joined. We were talking about AIDS for reasons I can't remember. But, I do remember him saying, "...these gays, they should be put up against a wall and shot."

In the 1980s and the 1990s AIDS was a disaster that had no miracle cure and cost many lives. But, worse than that, ignorance turned that disaster into a tragedy that meant many lives weren't saved that could have been.

Today, in the midst of our pandemic, we know how important it is not only to try to heal those who are sick, but also at the same time we know the importance of teaching, so that no one ends up dying of ignorance. For much of this pandemic there has been no vaccine and there is still no cure, so nothing has saved more lives from COVID-19 than public health information, teaching.

This isn't new. We've known for many decades that there is no cure for cancer, for example, and that the best defence we have against cancer is education, teaching. If you want to lower cancer deaths, first and foremost teach people not to smoke.

When it comes to illness, the miracle cure is teaching in order to relieve people of their ignorance about the illness, and about those who suffer from it.

In Simon's house on that Sabbath when Jesus came for lunch there is no suggestion that Jesus found it necessary to teach anything or to relieve anyone in the household of their ignorance in order to heal Simon's mother-in-law. But, what is evident is the care and the compassion he showed her.

Mark writes that Jesus went to Simon's home, 'as soon as they left the synagogue,' and when they got there Simon and Andrew told Jesus about her 'at once'. There is in these short lines a sense of immediacy and urgency, everything else is put to one side because someone is ill.

I'm sure there were many households that received their sick sons in the 1980s and the 1990s with an urgency and immediacy that swept aside ignorance and prejudice. In those cases, lives probably weren't saved, as Peter's mother-in-law's was, but I'm sure much else was saved of people's relationships, dignity, family, and love. But, in too many cases this wasn't what happened, the demons of ignorance and prejudice destroyed lives, families, dignity, and love.

Mark writes that when people heard about Jesus, once the Sabbath was over after sunset everyone came to be healed by him, and he cast out many demons. I'm sure there were many demons needing to be cast out. In the morning Jesus was exhausted and he went off on his own, but the disciples hunted him down. Mark chooses the word 'hunt' to assert the urgency of the situation; healing and teaching is urgent work.

Jesus, writes Mark, went throughout Galilee proclaiming the message and casting out demons. When there is no medical cure, the only ways to heal people are to show care and compassion, and to proclaim a message – that is to teach – far and wide in order to cast out demons. Jesus proclaimed the message that whoever they are, all people are worthy of dignity, respect, and are entitled to know what it is they are suffering from and what they can do to protect themselves.

Jesus cast out demons. Demons lurk in all societies, the demons of ignorance, prejudice, bigotry, racism, homophobia, rumour and gossip, and these things are as likely to kill you than illness itself.

When confronted with illness, Jesus showed care and compassion, he taught, and he drove out demons, and miraculously people were healed, survived and flourished in life.

There is much of that which we have applied over the past year of this pandemic: we have shown care and compassion to our neighbours; public health messages have been broadcast daily to teach us how to keep ourselves safe; we have relentlessly attempted to drive out demons such as ageism so that no section of society is forgotten about. Far too many have succumbed to Covid-19, but many have been saved.

As a society, we are learning from Jesus about how to perform miracles. If only we had learned that lesson thirty years ago. If we had, our ignorance and the demons that lived within us wouldn't have killed so many young people.