

Priorities

Mark 1: 29-39 (NSRV)

In our gospel reading today, the first chapter of Mark sets out an order of events which gives us an insight into the priorities of Gods' kingdom. Jesus having been baptised and tested in the wilderness immediately sets about calling disciples, preaching the good news and healing the sick. When I read this passage, it made me think of my priorities - recently I've been concerned for my eldest daughter, Faye. She has been recovering from COVID19 and she lives alone. On top of this she has been struggling with mental health. So, I have made it my priority to call her every day to check in on her, to give her some encouragement.

What is your top priority at this time?

Priorities are the things we give our attention to first, before or above everything else.

Our priorities are revealed in our actions, lots of people make promises and have good intentions, saying they will do one thing but end up doing something quite different, because it was not made a priority. Priorities can be obvious when they are connected to those in authority. Recently the world has witnessed the exchange of power and authority in America from one president to another. I was gripped by the stark contrast between the old administration's priorities on economy and patriot identity and the new administration's priorities of social justice and public health. I'm sure we can remember the turning point of when presidential power changed hands – the day of inauguration. Immediately the Biden administration acted tackling the Covid crisis, re-signing the Paris Agreement, addressing racial inequalities, making it very clear what their priorities are.

Closer to home, we see every day on the news how difficult it is for people to agree on the same priorities, there are tough decisions being debated by scientists and the government about who qualifies as the next most vulnerable group to receive the vaccine or what sector of the economy should be helped more. The media is filled with stories about groups of people who feel forgotten or overlooked in this order of priority. It shows how complex the needs are in this current crisis and adds to the pressure on those making the decisions. As our leaders and those in positions of authority demonstrate, getting people from

all walks of life, different situations and circumstances to agree on the same priorities can be difficult if not impossible.

As the people of God what priorities can we agree on?

Jesus begins his ministry on a Sabbath day, and He sets in motion the priorities of God's Kingdom, teaching, healing and casting out demons. His aim is to declare and demonstrate the good news of the Gospel, that the kingdom of God is near and that he has the power to heal and to set people free from all that oppresses them physically and spiritually. Choosing the Sabbath day to start his ministry, might seem odd, but it highlights the significant and symbolic meaning of setting apart a holy day where it is good to take time to stop and reverence God. It is rooted in God resting on the seventh day of creation. The Sabbath day was installed as a priority for the Children of Israel, as a reminder that while they were in the wilderness God was faithful and provided for their needs. To observe the Sabbath was written into mosaic Laws, so that God's people in the Promised Land would remember to keep the Sabbath day holy and in so doing they would prosper. Unfortunately, the Prophets bear witness that the observance of the Sabbath was repeatedly broken by the people of Israel, leaving it forgotten or distorted from one generation to another. And the people suffered for it.

The Gospels show us that by the time of Jesus, the Sabbath day had become a religious day, and was being used as a very restrictive way of controlling people, oppressing the poor and shunning the sick, preventing people from truly entering into God's rest. Consequently, the blessing of keeping the Sabbath day, had been lost. It is of no small significance that Jesus begins His ministry on a Sabbath day and by doing so, He demonstrates a major turning point, in the physical and spiritual world, a restoration of the Sabbath. Jesus wants to bring about a Sabbath rest for his people and he does this through teaching that the Kingdom of God is near and demonstrating it by healing the sick and casting out demons which brings health and freedom to the people of God. Jesus did this with authority and the people were astonished.

It is surprising to find in the immediacy of Marks gospel, that Jesus did not immediately go out from the synagogue and travel to all the surrounding villages and towns on a preaching and healing tour of the land, he could have spread the gospel message very publicly and his fame could have spread far and wide. Jesus' diary could have been filled with preaching engagements and healing revivals in no time at all. Instead, we find that he leaves the synagogue and with James and John tagging along, he comes home with Simon and Andrew.

Mark tells us that on entering Simon and Andrew's home, Jesus immediately heals Simon's mother-in-law who was sick with a fever and that she immediately gets up and serves him, showing us that not only did Jesus heal her of the fever, but that Jesus also strengthened her so that she was able to minister to them. Her immediate response to get up and serve Jesus and the other disciples reminds us that discipleship is responding to the call to follow the ways and teachings of Jesus by loving and serving God and loving and serving one another. To respond in love and obedience to God must be a priority in our lives, and in so doing, helps us to trust him with our needs and to grow in compassion for others. Jesus demonstrates his priorities by putting God first in all that he says and does whether he is in a public place or in a private home, the priority stays the same. To love and obey God and love people.

How do we as disciples, put God first?

The following morning after he spent the evening healing all those who came to Simon and Andrew's house, Jesus disappears to pray in a quiet place, to rest alone with God away from everyone and the pressure and demands of the world. Jesus demonstrates His first priority by retreating from the world to pray and spend time alone with God, because He knows He will be strengthened by the Holy Spirit for the tasks ahead. The disciples are surprised, when they find him gone, they were expecting Him to get on with preaching and meeting the needs of the people, but Jesus's actions demonstrate how important it is to be purposeful and remain focused to the bigger picture of His purpose on earth, rather than react to the pressures or expectations of the world. There is a great need among the people and yet Jesus' priority was to put God first, showing us that if the Jesus knows He can't meet the needs of the people without spending time in God's presence, then we too, also need to do the same. We humble ourselves by acknowledging God, finding rest in Him, and seeking His strength through prayer. It is out of this time with God that we are equipped by the Holy Spirit to love and serve God and to love others, especially those in need.

Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath, the holy rest was made for us, the disciples of Jesus today, and reminds us how much we need rest for our souls because we cannot do what is asked of us, to serve and love others in our own strength, but only in the strength of the Holy Spirit. Let us agree today on this priority to remember to put God first, by setting aside time on a regular basis to find a quiet peaceful space to sit and spend time with God through prayer and reading his word so that if, like me, you have a family member struggling or maybe you

know of a neighbour or a friend who needs practical help or some hope and encouragement through a phone call, may we find the strength we need from God to love and serve them better.

Let us pray

Lord Jesus,
go with us into the world this week.
Help us to remain focused upon you
and to make your priorities our priorities in
all the places you are sending us.
Amen.