**Action and contemplation** (Mark 1.29-39)

Neil Millar

‘Come healing of the spirit, come healing of the limb’ *(Leonard Cohen).* Those words (from our prayer for mercy) give a good sense of what’s happening as Jesus ministers healing and health to residents of Capernaum struggling in mind and body, spirit and limb. It’s been a big day for Jesus. It began with worship in the synagogue, where he taught and released that man with the unclean spirit (I spoke of this last week). After the service, he goes to Simon and Andrew’s house, but before he can even sit down, he is called on again. Simon’s mother-in-law is sick with a fever. In typical Markan fashion, the story is narrated with great economy – it’s deceptively simple, yet conveys much more than appears on the surface.

We’re told that ‘they’ (presumably members of the household) report the illness ‘at once’, which suggests it is serious. In response, Jesus ‘came and took her by the hand and lifted her up’. It takes just 11 words to describe this healing but what actually takes place here is worth pondering. To begin, this is the first example (of many) of Jesus effecting healing with a touch. Notice that nothing is said aloud, the communication is silent, sacramental. No words are spoken, but his actions convey care and connection. They also powerfully address limiting religious assumptions. For a Jew of that time to touch a sick person was to risk ritual uncleanness, a state further heightened in this case because the patient was a woman. It’s also the sabbath!! Jesus disregards these socially constructed barriers, reminding us that the kingdom he is inaugurating requires those who would enter it to change their way of seeing and being in the world – to look and act with mercy, justice, and love, rather than with self-interest, judgment and fear. *‘He went to her, took her by the hand and lifted her up’*. Not a word spoken, and yet, so much said.

And the effect of Jesus’ action is profound: *‘Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them’*. It’s an astonishing transformation and wonderful that she’s healed, but this text has also caused consternation. ‘The poor woman’, you may’ve been thinking, ‘she’s been seriously ill and no sooner is she better than she’s back at work – serving men!! So much for the kingdom of justice.’ That’s a fair concern, if that’s what’s going on. But is this what’s actually being reinforced here? A closer look at the language offers another perspective. In the original text the Greek verb (*σῴζω)* means *‘to heal’* and *‘save’.* That she *serves* after she is *healed* shows not only that she is well again but that she is also empowered to reciprocate and participate in what Jesus is about. S*erved* in Greek is *dekonei*, the root of our word *deacon*. In the NT, this word mostly has implication of official ministry on behalf of the Christian community. That this woman *served* is Mark’s way of saying she has taken her place as a disciple – all of whom are charged to be servants. Rather than being just another example of the oppression of woman, this incident with Simon’s mother-in-law may reveal that she, a woman, is the first in this Gospel to grasp the implications of true discipleship.

Anyway, getting back to the story, Jesus may have received a meal prepared by this woman, but that did nothing to lessen the busyness of his schedule, or the demand on his gifts. In fact, as evening descended, the whole town gathered at the door and, says the text, *‘he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him’.*

This is the first reference to what has become known as the Messianic secret – Jesus’ insistence that his name and work not be publicised. I spoke of this a few weeks ago, and suggested that the reason for his reticence is that he didn’t want people seeing him merely as a celebrity wonder worker. He gave himself freely, especially to the sick and struggling, but his intent was never to be politically powerful, shoring up popularity with miracles on demand – commodified ‘good news’. As his own ministry would demonstrate, suffering cannot be avoided, if suffering is to be redeemed.

Well, eventually the townsfolk must have returned to their homes, and Jesus, exhausted from the day’s activities, we imagine, eventually had time to rest. But not for long, it seems, for *‘in the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.’* And, here we see a very important principle in Jesus’ life. He balances work and action, with stillness and contemplation. Jesus isn’t hyperactive, and he’s not a workaholic. He’s not only useful when he’s busy. After a day of intense engagement, he intentionally seeks solitude and prayer.

This time is vital for his replenishment and renewal, but don’t mistake this for just relaxation or ‘self-care’. It’s about reconnecting deeply with the source of his being. In this space and time, he is able to reflect, he gains perspective. We know this, because of what happens next. We’re told that Simon and his companions ‘hunted’ for him – that’s what happens when someone gets popular, people want more. When eventually the disciples found him, they said to him: *‘Everyone is searching for you’*. With the inference, I suspect: ‘Come on Jesus, this isn’t the time to be off praying, there’s important work to be done – huge social needs to be met, a world to be righted! Come on, this is the moment – our ratings are going through the roof, let’s get back and into it’. But he’s not hooked. *‘Let’s go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do’.*

I can imagine the disciples were frustrated by him. First, because he’d disappeared to pray when there was so much to do. And also, because it seemed callous to refuse the immediate desire for his presence – maybe even unwise, given the success they’re enjoying. We too can be tempted in these ways. We can be seduced into reactively responding to demand – to be tyrannised by the urgent. We can get caught up in maintaining our place and popularity. And, though we might not say it aloud, it’s easy to think of prayer and reflection as a kind of indulgence, a waste of time, a spiritual-sounding cop out. If you’re like me, you resist praying. You don’t have time for it. There’s too much to do, including important stuff, like saving the world. And besides, ‘I’m not good at it anyway’.

\*\*\*

In the first chapter of Mark’s gospel, we are given the pattern of Jesus’ life and ministry. He is active and deeply responsive to the needs of the world. He is also reflective and prayerful; committed to times of solitude, time for restoring body, soul, perspective and priority. In this chapter, Mark consistently notes how Jesus spoke and acted with authority. Authority seems to come when our lives align with God’s calling, when we’re being what God calls us to be; doing what is ours to do. This requires the dynamic balance of action *and* contemplation; contemplation *and* action. ‘Without engagement or social consciousness, contemplation runs the danger of becoming disembodied interiority’, Philip Sheldrake writes. However, ‘without contemplation, engagement may mean merely restless activity or another idolatry’. And similarly, Henri Nouwen: ‘Prayer without action grows into a powerless pietism’, but ‘action without prayer degenerates into questionable manipulation’. Well, they’re all saying much the same thing – highlighting the importance of integrating action and contemplation. In Jesus, we see this integration, and Jesus says, ‘Follow me’.

I’d like to close with some words written and shared with me by my supervisor and spiritual director Frances MacKay. Reflecting on today’s passage she wrote:

I’ve always been drawn to Jesus’ words at the end of his life: ‘I have completed the work you have given me to do.’ Perhaps the only way we can know if we are on track is *not* to wait till the end, but to have a regular practice of reflection where we ask ourselves questions like: Where today have I been in step with my calling to love and serve? Where today have I not [no matter how busy or how many seemingly ‘useful’ things I’ve done]? What might this be telling me?

Perhaps these were the sorts of questions Jesus asked when he regularly went off to a deserted place to pray, as he does on this occasion. The disciples might be elated about Jesus’ growing popularity … but Jesus knew the dangers in this. After giving out as he had that day, he needed to be replenished, renewed and realigned if he were to fulfil his call rather than being distracted from what was his to do …

Perhaps that is why he can say with clarity, ‘Let us move on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.’