

May the words that I speak and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, now and always. Amen.

A few weeks back, the Sunday Gospel reading came from Chapter 3 of Mark's gospel telling us how Jesus was accused of being in league with Satan, using the powers of darkness to cast out demons. The underlying question was about Jesus's authority, but the emphasis was on his odd behaviour. Twice it is suggested that Jesus is simply mad – the only explanation that seems to explain his bizarre behaviour – and his family came searching for him to take him home for safe-keeping.

This morning we are three chapters further on, and again the underlying question still seems to be, who is this Jesus and who does he think he is? Jesus is back in his home-town. This time there's no mention of madness; it seems to be more of an accusation of jumped up arrogance... We know him, we know his family, he's nothing special, just one of us, so how can he do miracles? And so, Mark tells us, he couldn't, *because of their unbelief*. Mark doesn't seem to be particularly concerned about the poor response in Jesus's home-town; this account follows on two chapters full of miraculous events, so encountering such scepticism in one town is not serious... after all Jesus said it was only to be expected – *a prophet is not without honour - except in his own home*

But that emphasis on faith reminds us of the many other stories where Jesus makes specific mention of people's faith in the context of miraculous changes in peoples' lives ... *go on your way, your faith has made you clean, ...* -

And notice that Jesus doesn't appear to quantify or evaluate someone's faith when he heals them. It's enough that they have reached out to him, perhaps in a fleeting moment of hope. It's enough that they have said, *yes Lord, I do want to be well again*. And in some instances, they say nothing at all – we don't know about their faith. This matters because one of the questionable features of teaching on prayer and faith has been the tendency to quantify... and almost always to find faith wanting. Prayers, we have been told, have not been answered because we have too little faith... we haven't prayed fervently enough, long enough or faithfully enough for our prayers to be heard.

Such ideas of measuring faith are doubtful at best and damaging and destructive at worst. There is no good, for example, in saying, or even implying, to parents who have been praying desperately that God would keep their child alive, that they didn't pray hard enough, that they didn't have enough faith. Faith and prayer are not slot machines where the right number of coins will release the chocolate.

When I was looking for this passage from Mark in a modern translation I turned to *Word on the Street*, written by Rob Lacey, a modern paraphrase of parts of the Bible. As it happens, the gospel passage this morning isn't included, but on my way to finding that out I discovered from the back cover that Rob developed bladder cancer. He came close to death but pulled through to complete *Word on the Street* which was published in 2003. At the back of the book, I found this exploration of faith and prayer, his reflection on his survival. In his case, why me? means why I have I survived when others don't? That was the question he asked himself, and this is the answer he gave, in his rhyming street style;

But why me? Not her? Why me? Not them?

It's not cos I memorized the whole book of Job. Or wore an anointed prayer shawl or a special hospital robe. It's not cos we cried Mercy! a million times. It's not cos I wrote a hundred prayers with rhymes. It's not cos my wife deserves me, puts the sign reserved on me. It's not cos my son needs me; Twin Tower workers were parents too. It's not cos we've hung on, it's just that God pulled us through.

So, is it because I am worth it? Well, I am; I'm worth everything to God. But so was Jacqueline due Pre, so was Eva Cassidy, and if we update this, so was Stephen Lawrence, so was George Floyd.

So why? And when? Was it already planned right back then? Or did God shuffle and shift and watch all our prayers lift up past his eyes. And did he hear our cries? And did they all add up to Abraham or Moses-size? When they dared to do diplomacy with God? Did we, together, negotiate with God?

We'll never see the subplots, the alternative scenes, until we get to heaven, read the script and work out what it means. There's no recipe for what God gives free; there's no ace to play for grace.

It's not that I toughed it out with cameras up my nether regions, tubes pushed through my back, needles in my failing veins, platinum pumped through every track. It's none of that. It's not that I kept a certain attitude when interviewed. I'm no more clued than you.

I could've been a saint and still got stoned to death, could've interceded for the lion with my name on it, been compliant with my giant. I could've ridden into Jerusalem on a clapped-out Robin Reliant, and still it might have been that I would die. And we might have no idea why.

Would that have been God's will? Or is God's plan never to fill an empty grave? Or does he save each one of us? So how come some still die? And why this? Why that? And with answers so shy, what's the point of asking why?

So I won't try to work it out. I won't sweat to work it through. For now, Rob, just face it, God's mercy is focussed down on you. So leave your questions lying there; Leave your lopsided, left-heavy, rational rigorous brain. Just give God his fame. The always different, ever the same.

Lift up your voice and yell.... Thank Emmanuel, thank God with us. I'm well.

Rob died three years later, aged 43. He knew that the prayer-as-a-slot machine idea didn't work; *It's not cos I wrote a hundred prayers with rhymes*, or because he didn't write five hundred. Perhaps he continued to wrestle with questions about unanswered prayers, and miracles that didn't happen. Perhaps he was able to quiet his own questions by accepting the apparently unfair as mystery. Some find that peace, others do not.

When Jesus healed the sick he noticed and commented on the trust, the faith people had in him, but his response seems to have been to their need, their desire for things to change in their lives. There is a view that sees the miracles simply as signs of much bigger change... the kingdom of God breaking in. In this view Jesus is simply using the sick to demonstrate God's power, and compassion doesn't necessarily come into it. But that kind of instrumentalizing of people is surely what Jesus tried to avoid. His emphasis seems rather to fall on restoring people to right relationship with God... to turn them round, and call them back to God, so that they would come to understand how much they were loved by God – and can trust God. And that is how the kingdom grows.

But that's the challenge for us, isn't it? To trust God and keep turned towards him in the face of suffering, when the people we love die too soon, when illness debilitates and imprisons, when our security is compromised, and we find ourselves lost and hurting. And not just in such acute situations... in everyday life too. Perhaps in some ways that's even harder? When we are faced with a desperate situation, it can feel that there's nowhere to go but God – even if it's only to scream and yell at God. Day to day, we take so much for granted, and like to be so self-sufficient that perhaps we don't notice how defended we are against needing, trusting God.

When Jesus tells the disciples to go off in pairs to spread the good news, he requires them to trust the process. They aren't to protect themselves with suitcases full of gear, they aren't to book hotels ahead, they aren't even to take a packed lunch. They go with only the Good News, and their faith. And at this stage remember, they aren't going out to proclaim their risen Lord... It's not that belief that they need – or could indeed have. They are simply going out to copy the way their teacher has shown them, like any good and faithful disciples. – proclaiming the coming of God's kingdom, casting out demons and healing the sick. And going without the wherewithal to support themselves, so they

would learn to trust God, and accept their need of other people to support and help them on their way.

Maybe you are good at doing this already, but I find it's all much easier said than done... and so I'll tell you a story that I often tell myself... perhaps you know it too?

Once upon a time, after heavy rain the river broke its banks, the village was flooded, and people had to climb onto the rooves of their houses for safety. One of them was the faith leader of the village... may be the imam, or the rabbi, or even the vicar... a man of prayer who naturally turned to God in this time of distress. So he sat on his roof above the flood waters and prayed, confident that God would answer him. Dear Lord, he said, please keep me safe and rescue me from this disaster. After a while he saw his neighbours loading up a little rowing boat; it was very full, but they invited him to get on board... "we can squeeze you in too", they said. "Thank you, but I'm fine" he said, "I am going to be rescued very soon".

A little while later a police launch came by – "Are you ok?" they called, "we are on our way to rescue a family with young children, but we can come back for you" "I'm fine" he said, "I am going to be rescued very soon". They zoomed off and after awhile a helicopter hovered overhead... "Can we help?" they shouted down. "I'm fine," he said, "I am going to be rescued very soon now."

The day wore on and as it grew dark the man of faith prayed again, "Lord, please rescue me". And this time the Lord replied – "what on earth's the matter with you, man? I've already sent a rowing boat, a police-launch and a helicopter!"

Clearly trusting in God as disciples of Jesus doesn't mean that every prayer will be answered, or at least, not in the ways we expect. The ancient Israelites had that worked out centuries ago... In the book of Isaiah (Isaiah 55:8–9) it says -

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

As human beings we often prefer answers to mystery... but trusting in God not knowing the answers is part and parcel of discipleship. May God give us all grace to persevere as disciples on the road – and to keep an eye open for rowing boats and helicopters in times of trouble!

Amen.