

Epiphany 5 Mark 1:29-39

How often do we make time to praise God for those blessings in the midst of drama? It can be a bit of an automatic response we have rather than a true acknowledgment of God's hand in our lives but our readings this morning are all about how God cares and indeed acts in ways that we never truly understand. Even in the time of Isaiah, God's people were being educated in his way of looking at things, from beyond us, and how that is different from our way of looking at situations in which we are embroiled. Even the fittest may fall, Isaiah says, but those who look to the Lord will find new strength. The message is clear, we cannot do anything nearly as well in our own strength. But in order to be built up by God we have to look to him, we have to let him help, God will not barge in, but simply wait to be invited.

Then consider the psalm set for today. Here is an account of what it is the Lord can and will do for us. It speaks of the Lord's relationship with his people and how he comforts, heals and protects them. Also it tells of his creative influence over the earth, the weather, the provision of food for the animals, the fruits of the earth that are available for us all. So again we are left in not doubt that the Lord can and will intervene in our lives, he is interested in us and shares our earthly journey. But then the final verses pull us up again, The Lord does not delight in the strength of the horse, he takes no pleasure in the runners fleetness, his pleasure is in those who fear him, who wait for his steadfast love. You see God is not bothered about human strength, wealth or power, that is of no consequence in our relationship with him except in its ability to make us self reliant and conceited, to believe we have no need of God because we can face the world alone. What God seeks is those who recognise their own limitations and deficiencies and blesses those people with more than they ever could have hoped in their own strength.

Then we have St. Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, perhaps here is the greatest example of someone who has changed everything about themselves in order to respond to the relationship they found with God through Jesus. Paul recognises that he is nothing in his work as an apostle, he has no skill for the work, no strength and deserves no recognition from others for this wonderful work that he does because in fact it is God who does it all. God has revealed to him how things truly are and he cannot help but share that with others, he says it would be agony for him not to share this good news. And he explains how he has behaved differently towards different groups of people, being a Jew for the Jews and a gentile to the gentiles. Paul has understood Jesus' own model of ministry of coming alongside people as they are, where they are, without imposition of lots of rules and cultural practices that they don't understand, but just with the simple message of God's love towards them and an invitation that they can chose to accept or reject to live in the knowledge of that love. There is no compulsion, no judgement, just an invitation. Because it is God's invitation there need be no fear either, it is not a personal request but one from God and if people are not ready to respond to it we as the messengers, like St Paul, are not held responsible for their rejection. That is something to remember when we feel like sharing and witnessing to our faith but worry perhaps that those to whom we witness won't respond. We must leave that in God's hands and have faith that our words or presence in a situation may be important in God's work in ways we do not yet know.

So our readings are all about teaching God's people of the awesome power of God and also of his gentleness of relationship with us in that he waits for us to look to him for help. But what of the gospel reading? St Mark is recalling in this first chapter of his gospel some of the healing miracles of Jesus, prior to today's section Jesus had healed a man possessed by an unclean spirit in the synagogue, today's reading included the healing of Simon's mother-in-law and then a whole crowd of others as word began to spread, and after this Jesus goes on to heal a leper. This is certainly a continuation on the theme of God's awesome power, his

ability to fix physical ailments with just a word or a touch is one of the practical elements of Jesus' ministry which permeates his public encounters. But it has more in common with the other readings than that, each of these individuals whose healing is written about specifically by Mark are outsiders, unimportant, people who could not fail to know that they were weak in society. The man with the unclean spirit, ranting around the synagogue would have been very vulnerable to those who didn't want him disrupting the important work of the priests, Simon's mother-in-law, a woman, was barely important enough to be given a passing thought most of the time let alone a mention in a book, the leper was physically excluded from society and ignored by all.

Jesus, as the incarnation of God, The word made flesh, is also the practitioner of these teachings. He carries within him the awesome power of God and he uses it to help those who cannot help themselves. Those for whom pride was no longer a hurdle to cross, for those who were already in their hearts looking for God to come to their aid as the prophets and the psalmists had promised.

But what about us? How are we a part of this ongoing story, well 2 ways in particular. First we must be aware of our limitations and be open to God's help in our lives. It is human nature to try to do everything by ourselves, for ourselves, but there are times when we need to let God in. Discerning those times comes through prayer and sharing with God our ups and downs, it comes from having a relationship with him. We must put pride aside and let God in, he will do marvellous things if we only allow it!

Secondly we must let God use us to do marvellous things for others. We are Jesus' hands and feet in the world, we are his followers, and in order to do a good job of following him we must think as he thinks and do as he did. Our attitude must be like St. Paul's of service and giving without thought of what we get back. We cannot simply worship God together week by week in our church if do not go out in between and work for God in our communities. The hard part is working out what we can offer, each with our own talents, but if we offer to God our service through prayer he will find a role for us in building his kingdom, of this we need have no doubt. And it won't be suggesting people do what we have done, and change themselves to be like us, it will be in some way getting alongside them as they are and where they are and sharing the good news that God loves them today. May all our actions live out our learning through scripture and our example by Jesus.