

**Reading:** Mark 1:29-39

**Text:** Mark 1:34a And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons.

**Theme:** *Good news and good neighbours*

The media have always considered good news as not newsworthy. As a result, the kind of news that we hear on our TVs, our radios, and our internet are often bad news, or, worse, sensational stories that are not true at all, which the lazy among us, easily accept.

And last year will, surely, go down in history as an unparalleled year of bad news. The new corona virus was wreaking havoc around the world, and everyone was holding their breath that Donald Trump would not press the nuclear code and unleash the mother of all disaster

The gospels, on the other hand, are all about good news. Indeed, that is what the word gospel means: good news. And even the bad things that happen in the stories that they tell, often end up as good news. But good news about what? Good news for who? Why are they good news?

Well, Mark makes clear of that, right from the start of his gospel. He opens his gospel with these words: *'The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God'* (Mk. 1:1).

Why is this good news? What is good about Jesus? For insights, we need to know a little about the historical context of Mark's gospel and the story of Israel.

Scholars believe Mark was writing down Peter's recollections of his experience as a disciple of Jesus and, then, as an apostle of Jesus' church. At the time, Peter was the leader of the Christian community in Rome, and the community was being persecuted by Emperor Nero. As Emperor, Nero was the known and accepted son of God, and any good news came only from him.

For Christians in Rome and in other parts of the empire, who were living in fear because of political oppression, of diseases, of natural disasters, of eternal damnation, of religious persecution, or of any other thing that was making people afraid and less free, good news would come from the emergence of a hero that would liberate them from their fears.

And that is what Mark is doing in his gospel. He is challenging the power that be when he says, Jesus is good news and the Son of God. If you think about it, it is revolutionary stuff but mad and suicidal, also.

But Mark is so confident of Peter's story that in Jesus, Israel's hopes, as announced by the prophet Isaiah are being fulfilled:

In Isaiah 52:7, the prophet proclaims, O 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the one who brings good news, who declares to Israel: your God reigns!'

And he continues in Isaiah 61:1 when he announces: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.'

These are the very words that Jesus read at the beginning of his public ministry, in Luke chapter 4, where he says he has come to fulfil that promise of God.

Throughout Mark's gospel, we shall be discovering what the good news about Jesus is all about, with the ultimate being his death on the cross, a piece of good news that was foolishness to the wise and a stumbling block to the Jews. For today, however, we shall be exploring three of these things that Jesus is doing that is bringing good news to the recipients of Mark's gospel, which includes us, even though Mark would have had no idea we would be reading his gospel and grappling with it.

The first of these things is the merging of earth and heaven. The second is the liberation of people from the domination of evil spirit and sickness, which our reading for today is about. And the third is his being a good neighbour to the people that he meets in his public ministry.

The merging of the earth and heaven happens at Jesus's baptism. This event was pivotal in Jesus' ministry and his work. Before this event, he was simply the son of Mary and Joseph, or Jesus of Nazareth. Even though he was called by God to be his Messiah, or the Son, when he was conceived, Jesus did not accept that call until he was baptised. That is always the nature of a call.

God identifies people for particular roles, but the individual has to accept the Call. Good examples are Samuel and Jeremiah. So Jesus' baptism, therefore, was his saying, 'Yes Father, I accept my calling to be your Messiah, or the Son'.

And God affirms Jesus' acceptance of his call by tearing open the heaven and sending down the Spirit, and speaking to him from heaven, saying:  
"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased," (Mk. 1:11).

This incident suggests that God's heavenly abode is above but the barrier is now being ripped open. As a result, a direct connection between heaven and earth has been established.

The image of the spirit coming down like a dove and alighting on Jesus recalls the hovering of God's spirit above the waters at creation in Genesis 1:2. Here the spatial message is clear: the divine has broken through into our space in Jesus, or, perhaps, God has surfaced from underneath, in Jesus.

So the message that was mostly put in categories of time, is now put in categories of space. Who said Einstein was the first person to see time and space as equivalent phenomena? Ecclesiastes is right: 'there is nothing new under the sun' (Ecl. 1:9). Long before Einstein, Mark had shown that we can record our trips to Sydney, or to any other place, either in kilometres or in hours.

The good news here, is that, God now lives with us, for God has taken up human form in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The barrier that once existed between us and God is now broken. Mark's focus is the special relationship between Jesus and God.

And at the baptism of Jesus, the language of family stands beside the language of time and space. Jesus is declared the beloved Son, and through that special relationship between Jesus and God,

we also become children of God, as Paul has declared in Galatians 3:26: *‘So in Christ Jesus, you are all children of God ...’*

Here God's reality breaks through, and the hopes we have for God finds fulfilment – that was good news for Mark's community and for people who live under oppression of whatever kinds.

In today's reading, Jesus also brings good news to the sick and those whose minds cannot find rest. In ancient times, evil and demonic spirits were very real and were deemed to be the cause of all mental problems that people were experiencing, including headaches, like what is happening to Simon's mother-in-law.

There was great suffering and the people had been hoping for a cure, for someone with the power to drive out the demonic and evil spirits from those who have been afflicted. In other words, they had been looking for some good news. And in today's reading, Jesus is bringing that good news to the people.

He and his disciples arrive at the house of Simon and Andrew and find Simon's mother-in-law in bed with a fever. Jesus goes over and takes her by the hand and lifts her up. Immediately, the fever leaves her.

In the evening, people bring to him all who are sick or possessed with demons, and he cures any who are sick, and casts out many demons. In the next day, they go on to the neighbouring towns, and there he proclaims the message of liberation from evil forces and other kind of repressions, as well as the coming of God's kingdom. This was the good news that the people had been waiting for.

Today's reading also shows Jesus is good news by being a good neighbour to the people that he meets. He finds Simon's mother-in-law sick in bed, and he heals her without hesitation. Sickness was always seen as a result of sin. But Jesus does not ask any question, nor pass any judgement on Simon's mother-in-law or anyone else in the household. He just goes over and heals her. He does the same with the people that he heals later in the day. No judgement at all. He sees the suffering and he responds with kindness and offers them release.

Good news and good neighbour. That is the kind of Church that we want to be.

As you can see in today's reading and what Mark is trying to tell in his gospel, being good news and a good neighbour are ordained by God. This is what Jesus was sent to do and to show us how to do it. He brings God to dwell among us, he releases people from their afflictions, and he does it all without question and without judgment. He does it with purpose and with compassion.

We want to be a, good news and good neighbour church.

How, do you think, are doing?

To be sure, just because we are doing things for others and for our community does not necessarily mean we have become a good news and a good neighbour church.

A key element is how and why we do what we do in our service of others.

We have to do it for God and we have to do it, out of love. As Paul declares in that wonderful verse about love, in 1 Corinthians chapter 13: *If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing* (1 Corinthians. 13:1-3).

There is another thing that we have to consider. We are a church, but we are a collection of individuals. To become, a good news and good neighbour church, each of us has to live life as good news and a good neighbour.

How do you rate yourself in those departments?

Now, the word neighbour in ancient times had a different meaning to what we have. There were only two kinds of people then: your neighbour and your enemy.

An enemy was not someone that you did not like. No. The enemy was the stranger, always suspected of planning harm against you.

Your neighbour, on the other hand, was almost always a relative; someone that you knew would not plan harm against you.

And the early house churches organised themselves along kinship line. That means, your neighbours are members of your church, including those that used to be members, but are no longer members, for whatever reason.

The ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates, is known for his public advices to the people that he met at the market place. And one of his most famous advices, was, to reflect on yourself, for a life that is not examined from time to time, is not worth living.

Think about yourself. Have you been good news and a good neighbour to those that are here? What about those that are not here anymore?

Now, I do not know about you, but Grace, our girls and I are very excited to be coming here as your new minister at this time in your life as a church family.

I am aware of the pain and hurt that you went through, and I know these things can take time to come right. But I encourage you to look to Jesus' life. He is good news, because he offers us a model of how to live according to the will of God.

We saw that in today's reading from Mark. He did not judge the people that were unwell; he just offered service out of love.

That is also what we have to do. We have to be Christ to each other. It starts here with us, before we venture into the world, and it includes those that might have hurt you. You will need to forgive them, so you can be freed from the pain of the past.

I have accepted your call with the determination to be good news by being a good neighbour to you and to the wider Queanbeyan community. How? By doing what Ockert talked about his sermon yesterday: by imitating Christ in the encounters that I will have with all, and just with some.

And I do have the desire to be Christ to you, to journey with you, to laugh and to cry with you, and to enjoy your fellowship, to eat with your, and to experience your love.

And I challenge you to do the same, to be Christ to anyone that you meet in your journey in life, especially those who call Queanbeyan Uniting Church their church family.

May we become a church that brings good news to our neighbours, starting with the neighbours that are in our midst.

For the glory of God.

Amen

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