

The whole Jesus

In the lead up to today's gospel reading, Mark tells us: They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. (Mark 1:21-22)

Jesus had good things to teach. He was a good teacher – he was good at getting the message across. We can relate to good teachers, I think. We like good teachers. We remember them. We remember what they teach us. I've been fortunate to have many good teachers over the years, and I hope that we all have. And I hope that we're all good teachers when we have the chance, too.

So... Jesus is a great teacher. And lots of people who aren't his followers will even tell you that. He was a great moral and ethical teacher, they'll say: We should listen to what he said. And we should learn from it.

But we, as we become followers of Jesus, we get to know him – and get to know him as so much more than just a good teacher. There have been many good teachers throughout history, people who say wise and insightful and helpful things. And Jesus did that... but that's not the whole Jesus.

And now, in today's reading, we see a bigger a bigger picture of Jesus. Not just a good teacher... but the whole Jesus.

In verse 29, Jesus goes having called his first disciples – the fishermen Simon, Andrew, James and John, he goes with them to Simon and Andrew's home. And there, Simon's mother in law was in bed with a fever. First century medicine was not great, and the consequences of a fever could have been quite bad. And a fever would quite likely have been contagious.

They told Jesus about her. They may well have told him to let him know that he might catch the same fever - and it would have been quite reasonable for Jesus to say in response "Probably best that I don't stay here". But he went up to her... he took the hand of this very sick lady, and he helped her up.

Our experience of Covid has certainly taught us how dangerous a thing that could be. There should have been hand sanitizer and a mask and social distancing, at least! Normally, you'd think that the fever would have transferred from the woman to Jesus – that's what we expect. That's why we avoid touching sick people, or at least wash our hands afterward, and why nurses and doctors wear gloves when they're treating people.

Normally, the sickness would be transmitted from the sick person to the well person – that's how things work. But in Jesus' case – his wellness was effectively transmitted to the woman, and we read that "the fever left her, and she began to wait on them". She didn't just feel 'a little bit better', but she was healed, she was made well – she was able to function normally. She began to wait on them – as was the custom to wait on any visitors to her home.

And rather than her fever making Jesus sick, she was made well by Jesus. Cured. Healed. Restored to good health.

The natural order of things had been turned around. Not because of Jesus' good teaching – and there's no indication that he said anything to her. She was healed not by wise words, and not by medicine, not even by her faith in him, but simply by Jesus. By who Jesus is.

And this was big news. And that news travelled fast.

We heard that “That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door” (1:32-33). Presumably, they’d been at the synagogue and heard Jesus teach, and been amazed... but it wasn’t for Jesus’ teaching that they gathered at the door.

They didn’t gather at the door because they wanted to hear good teaching... they gathered there because they wanted healing. And healing was rare: remember, this was a society in which there wasn’t much you could do about being sick... you got sick and if you were lucky you’d eventually get better... but there wasn’t much you could do to be healed.

But Jesus’ healing of Simon’s mother-in-law showed – dramatically – that healing was possible. Not with a magic potion or anything, but simply by Jesus’ touch. This was a great thing... and people wanted it.

And so Mark tells us that Jesus healed many who had various diseases. Jesus’ healing wasn’t simply limited to ‘fever’ – but any disease, it seems, could be healed by this man from Nazareth.

It was a miracle.

Sometimes people will explain away miracles. Come up with logical or rational explanations for them. Perhaps explain that Jesus’ teaching allowed people to see their life differently, so that they could live with their disease. And sometimes people even claim that the miracles didn’t happen and they were made up by the gospel writers to make Jesus the teacher seem supernatural.

I think those explanations implausible, unsatisfying and often even dishonest. The accounts that we have were written when there were witnesses to the events around, and certainly an oral tradition of sharing the stories of what Jesus had done. People would have known, I think, if the gospel writers were simply making stuff up.

Of course, people might choose to believe that such miracles never happened, because they’ve never seen or experienced such miracles themselves.

I do think though, that there are many things we haven’t experienced ourselves... but we routinely have no problem accepting that they did happen.

The writer Tom Wright ponders that “We modern people think of miracles as the suspension of the natural order, but Jesus meant for them to be the restoration of the natural order”.

What he’s saying by that is that in his healing, Jesus wasn’t doing some sort of magic trick. Instead, he’s showing us how things should be, how the world should be. In his miracles, Jesus is pre-empting the kingdom of God – the new creation. In this new creation, there is no sickness. As John tells us in the book of Revelation (21:4): ““He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away”

So, we can see Jesus as a teacher... and we can see him as a miracle worker. But even that is not the whole Jesus.

If you can get your head around miracles... then we can move on to something even more tricky, something which is perhaps even harder to come to grips with.

Because verse 34 continues by telling us that Jesus “...also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.”

Demons.

How do you go with demons?

Not the devil, not Satan. But demons. I guess the evil equivalent of angels. Supernatural beings who are able to possess people.

Just as miracles are often explained away, so too is demon possession: Schizophrenia and other forms of mental illness are often used to explain biblical demon possession. And, certainly, the symptoms are often the same.

But I think that the accounts of demon possession that the gospel writers give us tell us that demon possession is something more than mental illnesses as we know them.

Here we have Jesus not letting the demons speak – because they knew who he was – elsewhere we have demons being cast out of a person into a herd of pigs. It seems there is something more to these stories than simply accounts of curing mental illness.

I think the important thing for us is what the casting out of demons tells us about Jesus; it follows on from the miracles, and lets us know that Jesus has a supernatural dimension as well as a physical one. Demons – supernatural beings – recognise Jesus for who he is. Here, Jesus stops the demons from saying who his is, but later, in chapter 5 of Mark's gospel - when Jesus casts out the demons into the herd of pigs - the demons identify him clearly "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the most high God."

So now we have an even bigger picture of Jesus, not only a great teacher, not only a worker of miracles, but now him being supernaturally recognised as the son of God.

And even that isn't the whole Jesus!

As we read on to verse 35, "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place where he prayed."

Jesus needed time out. Time to be alone. Time to be away from the disciples, away from the pressures of his mission. Time to pray. And I think this shows us another part of the whole Jesus, that he was human. He experienced what we experience. We see this throughout the gospels too – Jesus needing to get away and take time out. And Jesus being upset – notably at the deaths of John the Baptist and Lazarus, and him being angry – with Peter... but even with a fig tree, and of him being tempted, and of him being afraid.

I often reflect that many people have an image of Jesus as some sort of mystical figure gliding guru-like through history, saying some wise words, and ultimately drifting off up to heaven. But that's not how the scriptures depict Jesus. Life in the first century was hard; and Jesus experienced that life.

First thing in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got some time to himself... and then life caught up with him ... the disciples found him "Everyone is looking for you!"

Jesus didn't send them away, though - he knew he had a job to do. "Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so I can preach there also. That is why I have come".

Notice that he says "preach" and not "teach", even though in earlier verses Mark describes him as teaching (that's in verses 21, 22 and 27). Because Jesus wasn't simply teaching, he was, as Mark says in verses 14-15 "proclaiming the good news of God. The time has come, the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news".

That is why Jesus had come. To preach. To share the good news of the kingdom of God.

It wasn't simply to teach.

It wasn't simply to heal.

It wasn't simply to cast out demons.

It wasn't simply to experience human life.

It wasn't even simply to die for us.

But if we put all those things together, then we see the whole Jesus.

If we put those things together, we see Jesus proclaiming the kingdom.

All of those things point to Jesus: Jesus who taught wisely and with authority, Jesus who showed us the way the world should be through his healing, Jesus who was recognised as the son of God even by the powers of evil, Jesus who became one of us and lived a human life, Jesus who allowed himself to be betrayed, beaten and crucified.

And then rising triumphantly, and opening the way to everlasting life to us.

That is the whole Jesus.

And it is the whole Jesus who calls us to follow him.

Not just to think that his teaching was pretty good.

But to appreciate all that he has done for us.

We don't have to jump through hoops, or pass a test, or pay a fee, we just have to turn to him and put our trust, our hope and our future in Jesus. In the whole Jesus.

Amen.