

February 7, 2021 - 5th Sunday after Epiphany - sermon notes

Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-12; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

If someone were to ask you, “Why did Jesus come?” what would you say? You might say, ‘he came to save us from our sins’ or ‘he came to give us eternal life’ and you would be correct both times. Some people remark about his healing gifts while others speak about the peace that passes understanding. There really is no shortage of ideas that are valid statements about why Jesus came. Scripture has many clear indications of why Jesus was sent into the world and St. Mark, for one, records a statement from Jesus as to why he came. We find it in today’s Gospel passage which comes at the end of a very important week in the life of Jesus and his followers. According to Mark the first disciples were called and began their association with Jesus, they attended a synagogue service during which a deliverance from an unclean spirit took place and that same evening many healings took place at the home of Simon and Andrew. This kind of week is something about which all of us in leadership ministry dream. A rapid fire set of wonderful events is the stuff of legends and we hope to experience at least a portion of this kind of thing sometime during our ministry. How exciting it must have been for those first disciples to see, first hand, the power of the kingdom of heaven at work in such a short period of time. It does not surprise me at all that they seemed to feel that Jesus’ purpose - the reason he came - had to do with healing sick and damaged people. The evidence they had seen in the first week of their discipleship led them to understand Jesus’ work to consist mainly of healing. They weren’t completely wrong because, as we read more of the story, healing people was a very common action employed by Jesus so it is a bit of a surprise to read why Jesus thought he had come.

“When the [disciples] found him, they said to him, ‘Everyone is searching for you.’ He answered, ‘Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.’” (Mark 1:38) The long list of healing actions which took place the evening before could have been augmented by another equally long list had Jesus returned to the home of Simon and Andrew because even more people were looking for him. Instead of accepting this path Jesus stated that his purpose was ‘to proclaim the message’ and so he wanted to go to the next town. I was always surprised by this statement. To turn ones back on a crowd of people who are coming to see you do the work of God seems like such a foolish thing to do from my perspective. Jesus was determined, however, to maintain his purpose and so everyone who had been looking for him in order to obtain a healing touch were left waiting while he and his disciples went on to the next town in order for him to proclaim the message. As we know from an earlier portion of Mark that message consisted of the news that ‘the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near’ and that people were to ‘repent and

believe the good news'. At the core of all those good reasons we use to explain why Jesus came into the world is this idea that he came to proclaim a message. The proclamation of this good news propels the work of healing and salvation. Since this was Jesus' announced purpose it means that, as a disciple of Jesus, my purpose must contain that core idea as well - proclaiming the message that (In Jesus) the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news.

As I began to grapple with this reality a number of years ago I realized that I had been, as it were, putting the cart before the horse. I kept looking for the spectacular and trying to create a sense of wonder in order to be given a chance to proclaim the message. Jesus did it the other way around. The proclamation of the message, it seems, brings about the conditions in which souls can be saved, healings can happen, and deliverance from unclean spirits takes place and not the other way around. Jesus' role wasn't to come into one village and make it as healthy as possible before moving on. Rather, his role was to scatter the seed of the Good News and allow those seeds to grow so that the kingdom of God would impact more and more of society. It was, and is, through the proclamation that peoples' lives can more readily be impacted by the reality that 'the kingdom of God has come near'. St. Paul understood this relationship as well as he described in his letter to the Romans. He wrote, "But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'" (Romans 10:14-15) You see, I don't doubt for a moment that God wishes to heal people or deliver them from unclean spirits but it would seem from these passages to which I've just referred that these gifts come as a result of the proclamation of the message of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Just as St. Paul urged his friend Timothy we are urged to "proclaim the message, be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience teaching." (2 Tim. 4:2) Proclamation of the message of God comes in many different forms but, in reflection of the passage from Mark's Gospel, is to be at the core of all that we are to do as disciples of Jesus Christ.

The event recorded by Mark took place among a very small and fresh group of disciples and as the newly formed group of disciples travelled from town to town with Jesus they witnessed the effects of the proclamation. Stories of healing and deliverance followed them wherever they went but so too did the admonition to start with the proclamation. Later on, when Jesus chose 12 of the disciples to go on a mission trip he began his instructions with the words, 'proclaim the message' and so we need to, I believe, pay attention to the same kind of instruction. This motivation ought to become a part of our reason for being and the particular gifts and personality traits we have are to be used under God's

guidance to find methods of proclaiming that ‘(In Jesus) the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news’. Through word and action, art and music, prose and poetry we are to share this news that God has sent his Anointed One to announce that a new era has dawned and that light is breaking into this darkened world. We are challenged to examine our talents, abilities, and situations for ways in which we can extend this message a little further into the world around us.

I know of many different ways the people have used to proclaim the message. I know of a group of people who use their ability at knitting or crocheting to fashion objects that are meant to proclaim the message that the Kingdom of God has come near. The object is sent as a reminder to people who are going through difficult times and they are called upon to repent from their unbelief or despair and believe the good news. I suspect that were you to ask someone from the Prayer Shawl Ministry if they were proclaimers they would not understand their work in that way but that is indeed what it is. I know of painters who use their paintings to proclaim some aspect of the message that the Kingdom of God has come near and through that painting call people to repent from their doubt and fear and believe in the Good News of God. And how many singers use their songs to speak hope into what appears to be a hopeless situation - proclaiming that the Kingdom of God has come near and calling upon their hearers to repent from their feelings of hopelessness and believe in the Good News of God. These messages all convey the news that the God of all Creation has not forgotten His people. How marvellous it would be if we all took seriously the purpose in our life to proclaim the message that in Jesus the kingdom of God has come near and invite the people we know to turn away from their wrong assumptions and believe in this Good News.

Jesus told his disciples that he came to proclaim the message and St. Mark tells us that one version of that message was “the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news” We know that through that proclamation came healing, deliverance, forgiveness and peace. I don’t think the message has lost its power in all these years. I know too many stories of people who have been healed, delivered, forgiven and made more peace-filled in connection with their willingness to turn away from their wrong understanding to belief in the Messiah of God. Our task is to continue the proclamation of the message and as we do so we may very well see the signs of the kingdom of God coming near. May we follow Jesus’ example as we continue to minister to those around us during this time and into the future.

Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings with your most gracious favour, and further us with your continual help; that in all our works, begun, continued, and ended in you, we may glorify your holy name, and finally, by your mercy, obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.