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**Where memory fails the faith of the
community is threatened**

Isaiah 40:21-31

Mark 1:29-39

Year B Ordinary 5

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“Where memory fails the faith of the community is threatened.”¹

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?” (Is 40:21)

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? God is everlasting and does not grow faint or weary” (Is 40:28)

The prophet Isaiah challenges the people who are in exile in Babylon to not forget their story; to not forget their faith.

For “Where memory fails the faith of the community is threatened.”¹ as says one commentary on the prophet Isaiah.

No matter what assails them they need to remember, to tell their story, to pass it on.

That was quite a challenge over the 70 years of the exile.

As new generations were born who had never known Jerusalem their home, it was hard for them to hope for something they had never seen.

Like children born as refugees today. Or Palestinian children born in Gaza or those whose homes have been destroyed in recent weeks by Israeli bulldozers. They have no hope of return.

In our own context Waitangi Day is always a time of remembering, and recovery of the story of the settling of our nation. From the first waka of the iwi to the later waka from Europe we have great stories to learn, tell and remember.

¹ Richard A Puckett, Feasting on the Word Year B Vol 1, p315

The work being done on teaching our own history in schools is long overdue and the new Matariki holiday is another step forward. Last week as we drove to the beautiful Hawke's Bay we listened to Bishop John Bluck on RNZ² telling the story of missionary Charles Reay. He is not well known and only lived here for 6 years before his early death. But like all the early missionaries he learnt te reo; did his best to embrace the people he met with respect and love and often annoyed the English settlers with his support of the Maori way of seeing things. Bishop John says in learning about these early encounters between Maori and Pakeha we can learn more about how we can be partners today.

Otherwise "Where memory fails the faith of the community is threatened."¹

I recommend you listen to this series.

Another place our memory fails is in the passing on of the biblical story. Even within the scriptures themselves and our understanding of them over the years. We so often see what we want to see and miss what is there in plain sight. Mark 1 continues this very grand account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry where last week we heard about Jesus casting out demons; then this week we have "the whole city" of Capernaum gathered - and all who were sick were healed; then Jesus setting off across Galilee.

In the middle of all of this we hear about an unnamed woman, Simon Peter's mother in law. Jesus and the 4 disciples go home after the service in the synagogue and she is ill in bed with a fever. Mark says quite simply "Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her and she served them."

One simple description.

Or is it?

Jesus took her by the hand – scandalous; no man could touch a woman who was not his wife, mother, sister or daughter.

² <https://www.rnz.co.nz/programmes/john-bluck-writes/story/2018777282/john-bluck-explores-pakeha-identity-today-through-the-example-of-a-long-forgotten-victorian-missionary>

And she was unwell and therefore unclean.

2 rules Jesus had broken.

He lifted her up – it was the Sabbath, healing someone was work, so another rule broken.

He lifted her up is the same word used by Mark for the resurrection (16:6) “He has been raised”.

Jesus raises her up, brings her to new life; rules and regulations falling away.

Then she began to serve them.

Some feminist commentators feel this puts the unnamed woman back in her place of serving the men their dinner.

But the word that is used here for serve – diakoneo – is the word we get deacon from.

And Mark uses this word 3 times – the angels who wait on Jesus in the desert (Lent 1); Jesus himself – “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve”; and in the description of the women disciples at the cross (15:41).

One of the books on my shelf which I should probably consign to the recycling bin says “It is unlikely that the use of diakoneo (the word deacon) is meant to indicate that this is the appropriate form of Christian ministry for women; it simply indicates the normal domestic arrangement.”³

I think Mark is saying loud and clear this woman is now a deacon, ready for the ministry of service within the community of the followers of Jesus. She has had hands laid upon her, she has been raised up, she has been called to serve.

A non feminist commentator might say I am reading too much of our time back into Mark. I would say we are noticing what has been hidden in plain sight all along. For “Where memory fails the faith of the community is threatened.”¹

There are many many things in our lives we forget, or suppress or overlook. Both at a personal level and as communities and nations.

³ Ben Witherington Women in the Ministry of Jesus p 68 (1984)

We have learnt in the last years that changing the truth and offering alternative “facts” can lead a people and a country to dangerous times.

All over the world those who hold power try to define the story. The people of Myanmar are banging pots and pans in the evening to voice their protest – it is all they can do⁴.

Maybe the power of social media will also help them.

Arresting Aung San Suu Kyi for importing walkie talkies will seem rather antiquated then.

The people Isaiah wrote for learnt that “those who wait for God”, those who listen and watch and wait and pray and listen again will have their strength renewed, mounting up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” (40:31)

They refound their memory, their story; they recalled the great deeds of God and the people.

On this Waitangi weekend take some time to read an article or even a book or listen to a podcast about a story in our history that you do not know.

See what has been there in plain sight all along.

Remember the people of Myanmar and other places where the story is being changed to suit those in power.

And remember the unnamed first deacon of our church who modeled for us a ministry of service.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/02/the-nights-of-pots-and-pans-are-back-on-myanmar-fearful-streets>