



Rev Diana Rattray

Serving out of love

Isaiah 40:21-31

Mark 1: 29-39

Year B Epiphany 5

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When I was in my early twenties I worked in a parish in Christchurch. I was “employed” in a full time role without a job description or contract and for not a lot of financial return. The church saw it as tentmaking – in retrospect I see it as more exploitative. I worked ridiculously long hours and did all sorts of weird and wonderful things. I did learn a huge amount – mostly what I would not do again, and a lot about myself, that I couldn’t just work constantly and always be helping others – I had to stand up for myself and take time out – I needed the wisdom and guidance of others who had walked the road before. I also needed to learn to say no.

One of the other staff practised the art of calligraphy and she gave me an A3 poster of the last four verses of the Isaiah reading today. It was very beautiful in gold and black and was on my wall in various flats for a number of years. My slightly more concrete theology of the time had me beating myself up about not having the faith to believe that God gives power to the faint – the young will fall exhausted – but those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary. I seemed to be constantly tired and left the role after a number of years absolutely exhausted – and broke.

I have a very different view of this passage from Isaiah now, and in our contemporary times there is even more to wrestle with in our understanding of divine power which lies beyond the realms of earthly experience. Diametrically opposed groups each claim to “hear and understand” the Divine, and then impose their power on others. There are conflicting powers within governments, media, societies, nations and faiths which sometimes lead into a sense of weariness, or heaviness that prevents us from hearing and believing the possibilities of the fullness of God in our midst. War, oppressed peoples, the growing chasm between those who have wealth and those who do not.

And yet, there is hope – there is hope because of the people, there is hope because of acts of love – offered and received.

There is hope because of people who speak out against those trying to strip power from others, speaking out for those who are being exploited, or trafficked, or worse. People who make a difference because of their “deaconing” – not just in the ordained sense of the word. They make a difference through their words, their actions because of their faith and hope in the world in the fullness of God’s love.

At the start of our gospel passage today we heard an account of Simon’s mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. She experiences the transformative healing of Jesus. She immediately gets up and starts serving the household guests. Yes - it would have been an expectation of the women in the time of Jesus, to serve the men. However the verb is written in the imperfect tense – she began deaconing – outward facing - serving others. The meaning of her actions was transformed because of Jesus’ healing. She did not serve and minister to them out of duty – rather she served out of love. This unnamed, uncelebrated woman, was as much a follower of Jesus as her son-in-law Simon Peter or any of the named disciples.

All of us have that opportunity too. To live the abundant life of Christ as we follow the example of one who lived a life offering healing and love.

In the Gospel we hear of a man who also knew when it was time to move on, who knew that he could not be available for everyone all the time and sometimes he had to move on. That he needed to take time out, to seek space for prayer, and just being.

Those who gathered around Jesus, in Simon Peter's home both named and unnamed were witness to the miraculous. Someone who preached sense and healed through touch. He did so in a way that minimised his own power. He even silenced the "demons" who were going to name him, out him if you like". He was reserved and did not want his reputation of being a miracle worker to be the only focus of who he was and his ministry. What he did at any one time needed to be seen and understood as part of a life's journey which included moments of power as well as ultimate powerlessness in a violent death. We too can only understand our life and our faith if we embrace the good times, the miraculous, as well as the hard times. The downfall of some in leadership in our current society and world is that they will only focus on their power and not their vulnerability. Some will try to maintain power at all costs. Innocent people are caught up in power struggles with awful consequences.

In the words of academic and theologian Bill Loader: "Jesus did not exercise his ministry on the basis of his need to be needed, but on the basis of what he could do as a bearer of the Spirit, nothing more. That is always enough – and never enough to meet all needs. Failure to acknowledge our limitations often leads to denial of the immensity of human need, because we are afraid of not being in control."^[1]

Perhaps they and all of us can keep our perspective as we hear this gospel today. Jesus withdraws for solitude and prayer when he realises he is being misunderstood. Being sought only for the miraculous. Rather than focussing on the glory stuff – he leaves and moves onto a place where he can teach and preach as well as offer healing.

We read the stories in the gospels, knowing how the story will end – death and resurrection.

As we move into the second month of 2024, as a new academic year begins, as our life and faith journeys twist and change, what is constant is the knowledge that God's realm is in the midst of all we do. I know that as I step out into a new role - into the unfamiliar.

We may not have first-hand experience of the person of Jesus, but our lives are changed because the Word became flesh.

As we move into the Eucharist God continues to reveal Godself through bread and wine, words and music. The words of the prophets like Isaiah as well as the word made flesh who dwells among us.

As we acknowledge that revelation each one of us is called to respond. In words, in action, through love. As Simon's mother in law did – through service – motivated by love not duty.

As we share the love and grace we have known in Jesus we offer a listening ear, say a kind word, offer a helping hand, and in doing so, we continue to experience the love of God flowing through us.

And in doing that loving service love continues to grow within us.

So may it be. Amen.

[1] <https://billloader.com/MkEpiphany5.html>