Dursley Tabernacle 28th January 2018

In this brief 4 weeks series focussing on the first chapter of Mark we have come face to face with the essence of our Christian journey.

A bit of a recap first for those who weren’t able to be here for the whole of the series. Firstly we explored the baptism of Jesus. John the Baptist was baptising people with water in the Jordan but declaring that the one who is to follow him is going to baptise with the Holy Spirit. And so it is, Jesus comes and John baptises him and as he does God speaks – the sky is opened and the spirit descends on Jesus like a dove and we hear “ You are my son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased”. And then Jesus goes off for a time alone, to the desert where he overcomes temptation and gets ready for his Ministry, his life’s journey.

In the second week we looked at the way Jesus called his first disciples, drawing Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John away from their fishing boats , to make them fishers of men. They responded to that call without hesitation and followed Jesus for the remainder of his ministry on earth. It is difficult to imagine the kind of pull Jesus must have had for them to leave their businesses, their source of income, their homes and families to follow him.

Then last week Simon explored the first part of what was a very busy day for Jesus in Capernaum. We saw Jesus entering the synagogue on the Sabbath, teaching to the people gathered there. It was noted how he taught with authority. Then he casts out an unclean spirit who recognises that Jesus is the Holy one of God. But Jesus tells it to keep silent and to come out of the man. It does so immediately and the man is healed. And news about Jesus spreads throughout the region of Galilee.

Simon highlighted the connection between the spiritual world and the physical world we live in and how important it is to recognise the spiritual struggle in our world; that we are often blind to it or too worried to acknowledge it exists.

But it is the authority of Jesus that names and shames the unclean spirit – that brings healing and wholeness, that restores the man who was shackled by an unclean spirit back into his community, freed of his demons.

This weeks’ reading centres on the rest of that same day and the early morning of the following day still in Capernaum.

Jesus has gone with Simon Peter and his other disciples James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew straight from the synagogue. On getting there Jesus learns that Simon’s mother in law is sick in bed with a fever. The first thing he does is to go up to her room, he helps her up and she is completely healed – so much so that she is able to get up and immediately starts waiting on them. What a recovery!

As dusk approaches and the Sabbath comes to an end villagers come to the house bringing the sick and those possessed to Jesus - the whole town it seems are there outside the door, witnessing the healing of many diseases and the driving out of demons.

Maybe Jesus is able to sleep for a few hours but before dawn on the following day he is up and goes to a quiet place to pray alone. The disciples come looking for him surprised to find him there. Then Jesus tells them that it’s time to move on and leave Capernaum. They can’t stay put. So they start their ministry travelling throughout the rest of Galilee teaching, healing and driving out demons.

So what does this first chapter reveal to us about our Christian journey.

Firstly it demands a time of preparation - preparation for us in responding to Jesus’ teaching initially in Baptism, in confirmation or both – after hearing his word, learning of his good news, we make our response, we repent and seek renewal opening our hearts to his spirit and make our commitment promises And as Simon said last week he is going to be starting classes soon for baptism and confirmation so if you feel called to that do speak to him and have that time of preparation. The first meeting is taking place on Sunday 11th February in the Vibe.

Secondly we need to respond to Christ’s call in whatever way he leads us. And we need to be obedient to that call by making a real commitment to whatever it is. And it will be different for each one of us. For the first disciples it was pretty dramatic – follow me meant literally leaving home, business and family and going to the unknown to spread the good news of Jesus and to support him in his healing ministry.

For others it is a calling to be in community, serving those around them. Getting alongside folk who are deeply troubled by their 21st century demons, caring for those who are caught up in worldly demands, who feel unable to break away and experience the love of god in their lives. For others it may be a more practical calling for work in the community meeting the needs of others through the foodbank or contact centre for example. Or maybe focussing more globally and speaking out against injustice and lack of opportunity and equality in our very unfair world.

Throughout Marks gospel there is a sense of urgency – time is short, there is a job to be done, no time to waste and that day in Capernaum sounds pretty hectic. We need the same urgency today to address the needs around us.

We all know the saying don’t we if there’s a job to be done ask a busy person. We’ve been remembering dear Joan Kingham this month and she was one of those people. But we will all know many such people.

But note that even in the midst of a busy schedule Jesus took time out. The importance of rest, recuperation and fellowship is still so important for us today in our Christian journey and perhaps even more so with all the demands of life. On that day in Capernaum Jesus too takes time out. After their visit to the synagogue and at Simon Peters house the few gathered there have a time to rest, to be served on, to enjoy fellowship together. It’s as though there is a role reversal for a short time. Simon Peter’s mother in law takes it upon herself once restored to full health to serve on them, an early understanding perhaps of what discipleship is. We all need a time of gathering together, here at church on a Sunday morning or in other people’s homes at other times too in fellowship.

I am always slightly questioning of people who say they are Christian but say they don’t feel the need for church. Well maybe not some churches where they find worship dull or boring, maybe that does raise a genuine question mark for some, and maybe especially for young people, for whom meeting in the way that most of us do on a Sunday seems irrelevant. But some form of coming together I do believe is important. Soul Café is proving to be a great place for some folks to get together. We all need time to pray together, to give thanks together, to learn together. Don’t forget there are other opportunities to do that in our tab week, on Tuesday mornings at our prayer group, or Friday evenings, or at the fellowship groups. And other more social occasions but times when folk come together to enjoy Christian fellowship is so much a part of our Christian journey.

I had a few years when I didn’t attend a home group but I missed it and now really value the one I do attend. It’s truly a time to get alongside each other and to build each other up and to support each other. I know we’re going to be thinking about revitalising our home groups so do consider joining one when the opportunity arises so that you too can enjoy and be refreshed in this way.

In our Christian journey that same balance is vital. Otherwise we too can be overcome and weakened. Self-doubt and anxiety can creep in, often without us realising it. Some of you will know that 9 years ago I became sick with what at first seemed to be neurological problems. I was off work for a year, but over the months it became more and more obvious that I wasn’t actually physically ill but I was suffering with acute anxiety and stress which was work related. Basically my body after so many years of working flat out, just gave up and told my mind to shut down. I’d always been a doer, a list worker, if it wasn’t on the list it wouldn’t get done but I was almost paralysed I suppose by the ever growing list of things to be done. My body and mind needed a long time to recover and with the help of some meds I eventually did recover. But even now I know the warning signs and pull back a bit from getting over busy. I have learnt how to pace myself and listen more to my body. There are probably a lot of us here today who are a bit like that. And because we come across as pretty competent and organised no one would think that we struggle at times. So that fellowship for others to get alongside us when we are finding life a bit hard is so important. Being isolated is the worst thing in those circumstances. I have tried since then, despite the loss of a successful career, to learn more about balance and the importance of giving oneself into the hands of God, of trusting in his healing. I still however do rely on lists…. If its not on a list its not going to get done, but my lists are a lot shorter these days! And I must say in more recent years in terms of church life I have really asked the question what ministry is God calling me to. Where can I make a difference? And even my calling to preach is a struggle for me but one I can’t ignore it seems.

Jesus at dawn finds solitude and quiet after his busy day in Capernaum. He goes out alone to pray and is renewed and refilled with the Spirit of God. He is ready for the next steps of his journey, going further afield into Galilee to teach, heal and cast out demons. We too need that time to be prepared, refreshed and renewed for our individual next steps in our Christian journey.

The beauty of our human personality is that some of us are doers, others thinkers, others great carers blessed with empathy and compassion. All are so vital for our Christian mission today. Paul, in our Corinthians reading, talks of making himself a slave to everyone to win as many as possible for the Kingdom.

“I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some”.

In common parlance today we talk about getting alongside people, showing empathy and compassion and understanding so that they can know something of the love of God through his spirit, as comforter, encourager, counsellor.. And we have some wonderful people in our church who do indeed get alongside the depressed, the overwhelmed, those who feel they have no control in their lives, and of course the sick, and housebound. How valuable is that when our health services are struggling so badly to meet the basic health and mental needs of our population. And the comfort that we can bring to people has added value, it also has the promise of the love of God and freedom from dark powers that possess us.

The old testament reading for today is from Isaiah ch 40 and includes the verse, “ But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not be faint.” Let us draw on that hope, be strengthened by it so that we do not grow weary.

Yesterday the URC launched its latest initiative as part of Walking the Way which Simon introduced us to before Christmas. This is a series exploring Holy Habits, many of which we have touched on today. There is a recognition in the national church that we should be more Jesus centred.

So today maybe you can take some time to think about your holy habits…

Yesterday the Alpha course spent the morning thinking about the work of the Holy Spirit. A phrase that touched many of us came from the mouth of Jackie Pullinger, a lady who works in Hong Kong with drug addicts, seeking healing through the holy spirit alone. She talked about the Holy Spirit making hearts soft and feet hard, hearts softened by the love of God, and feet hardened to do his work.

Are you prepared and open to the Holy Spirit empowering you, to have your heart softened and your feet hardened for his mission?

Have you been open to Jesus’s call? Are you opening your heart to hear what you are being called to do or to be? Can you be a doer, or someone who can get alongside others to show them the love of Jesus and free them from their demons.

Are you carrying out the ministry you have been called to do in love and commitment? Or are you finding other distractions or things to delay you.

Are you seeking refreshment in the fellowship of other Christians and allowing yourself to be supported by them? Remember whatever your situation you belong to the family of God, you’re special, an adopted child of God.

And are you taking time out alone, to allow God to bring balance into your life, to be renewed and to pray. Are you allowing the spirit of God to break you free from bad habits – to be drawn into a closer relationship with Jesus.

As we come to the end of this first month of the year let us recommit ourselves to taking upon ourselves Holy Habits so that we too can work for the kingdom of god in this place, in our community and in our world. May we too have soft hearts and hard feet ready to do his will. Amen