

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time B - Let us go elsewhere, so that I can preach there too, because that is why I came

February 7, 2021.

Concluding the introductory section (Chapter 1) of Mark's gospel, this Sunday's reading (1:29-39) further clarifies the nature of the mission Jesus means to share with his disciples. As we have seen, the healings and deliverance performed by Jesus are part of his preaching of the Kingdom, signs that **God will triumph over all the forces of evil in the world.**

There are practically no details in the gospels of the family circumstances of the apostles. The account of the curing of Peter's mother-in-law is therefore remarkable. It is generally accepted that Mark composed his gospel in Rome about the time of Peter's martyrdom. If this is true, Peter's telling of the story of Jesus would have been an important source of his material. In this incident we may well hear echoes of Peter's voice describing a sequence of events. Peter brings Jesus from the synagogue to his home for a meal; finds the old lady ill with fever; Jesus heals her instantly by taking her hand and helping her up. Fully recovered, she gives herself to the service of the Lord. By evening, word had spread that there is a miracle worker in town. People came crowding around Peter's door, bringing the sick and 'possessed' for healing. Jesus responded to their appeals; but in his silencing of the 'devils who knew who he was', we are reminded that these people still have to learn who he is. Very early the next morning, Jesus went to a lonely place to pray; and while he was there, Peter and the other disciples tracked him down and told him that the whole town was searching for him. Now, there are a couple of hints in the text that something big was going on. Mark specifically mentions Jesus in prayer like this only three times in his entire gospel (other two: in 6:46 before walking on water, and in 14:32 agony in the garden) – and each of these times is associated with a major turning point in Jesus' ministry.

There is no doubt that Jesus worked miracles. Miracles, as we all know, have an "unhealthy fascination" for many people. Miracles never happen in our comfort zone. We only need a miracle when we're at a low. Mark is concerned that his readers are not carried away by the fact that Jesus was only a "wonder worker". Period. They must understand that the miracles of Jesus were signs inviting people's faith in the coming of God's salvation into the world. True faith in the Saviour will come, in the end, to understand that the greatest wonder in the life of Jesus of Nazareth was the salvation he brought to the world as its crucified Saviour.

Now, since Jesus was a big hit, people searching for him certainly wasn't a mob after him for free meals – that comes later (Jesus feeds the five thousands, Mark 6:30-44). In fact, it was most likely exactly the opposite. Most likely, the town really liked what Jesus had done, and they really wanted to keep him there so he could keep on doing it. Perhaps the only person in Capernaum who really understood all of this was Peter's mother-in-law. We don't know her name, but we do know from her the truth. It's simple. "He came and took her by the hand, and lifted her up. Then the fever left her; and she began to serve them." She didn't try to put Jesus in the medicine cabinet or in a shop down the street. She served. She moved beyond herself, gave the gift back to the Lord and answered his calling. Such is our choice as we live out that part of today's gospel. As the church, we can try to hire Jesus, or we can strive to serve him, which means to serve as he did. It really is a hard choice, as hard as our personal choices between comfort and faithfulness, as hard as Jesus' choices between taking the cushy job or moving on.

We have to make Jesus' story our story. Very often we have to make difficult choices in our life. We have to give up staying with the easy and good for ourselves and choose to move on for what is hard but right for the good and love of others. We know the power of security, prosperity, safety, and respect – especially these days. While writing this, it brings back the fond memories of my good old days in Calgary. I was working for a consultant firm, Montreal Engineering, specialized in thermal power plants design. With booming oil industry in Alberta, it was expected more thermal

power plants would be built. My job was secure and the pay was good. When we're expecting our first child, I bumped into the department head at a shopping mall one Saturday. Went back to work on Monday and got a \$100 pay raise without asking. \$100 in the 1970s was a good raise. Then oil crisis turned oil price into a roller coaster, from US\$3 in 1974 to \$40 in 1979 and then dropped to less than \$10 per barrel in the 1980s. The energy crisis led to greater interest in renewable energy, nuclear power. During the crisis, thermal power industry projects were on hold. New oil industry, especially oil sands projects were cancelled. Laying off was common in Calgary. The company tried to keep me active but finally, in early 1986, I was semi-layoff/retired, staying at home! During this time, everyday, I took the kids to school and picked them up, helped in the parish, took some business admin courses at University of Calgary, did house chores, etc. On Christmas Eve that year, I got a call from my manager asking if I like a three years contract with Nova Scotia Power with one week home every month starting January 1987. My immediate response was no. I don't want to miss my family. My family is more important than a job. Then in February '87, Syncrude in Fort McMurray was looking for experienced engineer for their Utility Department. I applied, got a two hours interview and was accepted: good position, good pay.

They flew our family up for a weekend with all expenses paid for to search and purchase house. I then drove myself up started working while Philomena arranged to sell our house and organize the packing in Calgary. I flew back to drive the family up on Friday July 31, 1987 — the Black Friday to Edmontonians. The plane flew through the powerful and devastating tornado storm that ripped through the eastern part of Edmonton. The plane free fell many times, down and up, down and up. People were screaming and children crying. I honestly was terrified wondering whether it's God telling me to stay in Calgary. Praise the Lord, finally we made it through, stopping in Edmonton for three hours and finished the flight safely. I got the message: the Lord is with us in all downs and ups! We moved from a big city to a 35,000 people town and it would take 5 hours one way driving on an undivided highway to have good "dim sum" in Edmonton. Montreal Engineering kept on offering me jobs in Calgary, but I declined. Like Jesus, we need to move on. I always wonder if there was no oil crisis, if we didn't move to Fort McMurray, if I moved back to Calgary, if ..., would I still get the call to taking the diaconate formation, would I be a permanent deacon, would I be writing this now? Our life is not defined by the opportunities we have but by the quality of our responses.

We know how easy it is to settle – to settle for being even just a little less than who we know we can be; to listen to those loud voices; to let their expectations rule. After all, there comes a certain point when questions like this begin to matter; when they begin to cost, when things get painful. And when that happens, the sense of who we are – of what it means to be the beloved child of God – can easily fade into the background. So we have to make choices, and whether we know it or not, the Lord of heaven and earth waits, to see what will happen. That's one way we live out this story. Through the grace of God the Father, Jesus rose from prayer and told Peter and the rest that it was time to go. The people searching for him were disappointed, but without moving on, the Kingdom of God will never grow in power. No matter where we are on the path of our faith journey, we are all invited to advance the growth of God's Kingdom. As we are called to rise from prayer, to move forward in service, the Kingdom of God continues to break into our world. "***Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to all creation***" (Mark 16:15-18).