

Keeping Balance

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Isaiah 40:21-31, Psalms 147:1-11, 1 Corinthians 9:16-23, Mark 1:29-39

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I invite you to imagine with me the Gospel reading today before we revel or not in being described as like grasshoppers.

Jesus and his four disciples had been to the Synagogue. They were gathering for fellowship at Simon Peter's house, just as we enjoy gathering for a drink and nibble after worship. It was a short walk. There was anxiety in the house. Peter's mother-in-law was sick with a fever. In those days there were no antibiotics. A fever could spread quickly through the community.

She could be very ill and highly embarrassed at not being able to do her hospitality duty.

Imagine also the anxiety felt in that house about Simon and Andrew having left fishing to help Jesus. Who would bring in the income needed by the family? Their life was in an upheaval.

Now there were visitors to lunch, including this new person Jesus.

Did the matriarch have psychological stress?

Have you been in that sort of situation when the host is suddenly sick? Everyone has to pitch in, be quiet, care for the ill person and leave early.

Jesus was taken to see the mother-in-law in her bed. His behaviour was unorthodox for the times. Visiting guests would ordinarily never enter the room of a sick host. Jesus did. He wasn't bound by custom or by fear of contagion. He touched her hand. He helped her up.

He was breaking several rigid rules regarding hygiene, healing on the Sabbath and an unrelated male touching a female.

The Church in its pastoral care has to be very careful about touch.

Clergy have to attend boundary workshops to learn what appropriate behaviour is. The word Mark uses of Jesus' 'raising' was the same word he used when he healed the little girl later in his ministry. Remember she was described as being

‘dead’. Peter’s mother-in-law was very ill indeed. The same verb ‘raised’ is used for Jesus’ resurrection.

This miracle highlights the value he placed on women and in those times their ministry of hosting. The word used of the healed woman in serving the household is the same word to describe a deacon, a member of the diaconate order of the church. What an honouring of her role.

Then Jesus lets her serve him and the family. There was a mutuality of ministry. I wonder if Peter told this incident to Mark. In first Corinthians Ch. 9 we read of Peter’s wife accompanying him. We get a glimpse into Peter’s family life.

In the evening after the Sabbath was over all the sick came to Jesus for healing. The whole town came, how exciting – and on the Sabbath. There are 200 verses in Mark about miracles. These healings, however, were distracting Jesus from his mission of preaching for salvation. At this stage Jesus did not want people to know he was the Messiah. He didn’t want pressure to set up an army to defeat the Romans. He did not want people to come to be healed and not to hear in depth about God’s good news.

The next day Jesus was up well before sunrise. He needed to pray without the distraction of noise or the clamour of people.

How would he shape his mission and those disciples?

Mark’s Gospel records Jesus praying two other times. Luke has 8 times when Jesus went to pray. Jesus sought a balance between ministry with people and listening to God. In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed to God, ‘ --your will be done’. In the prayer he taught us we say, ‘your will be done’.

Was his prayer at this crucial time ‘your will be done’?

The silence is broken as we find Simon and the others hunting for Jesus. What a hostile word. Not looking or searching or seeking but hunting! Then they reproached him. Everyone is looking for you.

Why are you here by yourself? they would have wondered.

The disciples wanted activity and excitement.

Jesus reaffirmed that he was there to preach. He was not going to let the disciples plan for him. He was not going to bask in being a celebrity.

In fact, later Jesus was to find that in Nazareth and Capernaum he had little success in drawing people closer to God.

He noted that ‘a person is without honour in their home town’.

The plan Jesus established was to go from Capernaum, to the neighbouring towns, to all of Galilee. Soon he appoints more helpers. They are helped to proclaim the message and Jesus is then described as the teacher. His pattern of activity and prayer guided and sustained him.

We can model keeping a similar pattern, so that we also might be sustained. What about grasshoppers? In exile in Babylon, the people of God wondered about their relationship with God. Where was their God?

They were faint, weary, powerless and exhausted. The picture of God is so exalted in the reading that the human inhabitants were seen at a distance, as small as insects, as grasshoppers.

Grasshoppers can jump 20 times their length. There are 18,000 varieties, many brightly coloured to warn off birds. They easily leap away, hide and have a built in fiddle to play. More importantly, they have 5 eyes and they see beyond the blade of grass to a wide horizon, a great panorama. To be in awe and wonder about their Creator God lifts people to new heights, to find wind beneath one’s wings, to use another metaphor. God’s comfort is to give strength.

The non-fainting God ministers to fainting creation: the non-weary God gives life to weary creatures. The passage describes another call to pray, to wait, to hope and expect, taking time out to wonder at creation.

Balance in our lives. Today we are encouraged to make time for prayer and time for enjoyment of God’s creation that we might say to God - ‘Your will be done’ – and done by you and us in partnership together.