

“Two ways.” Mark 1:29-39

And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, “Everyone is looking for you.” And he said to them, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.” And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

For our today's meditations we have this account from the Gospel according to Mark. And it is quite confrontational. For it reveals something rather unpleasant for us. It reveals two different ways. Two ways to understand what the Church is.

So, this is what we will do today, we will try to understand what our today's reading teaches us **about these two different ways**, so that with the help of the Holy Spirit we can discern them clearly and know which one to walk.

Already last Sunday we reflected on how Mark portrays Jesus. As this dynamic figure, entering our human realm and stirring up all sorts of reactions. Last time we read how Jesus called His first disciples. Immediately they followed Him. Now He goes to Peter's house and immediately heals his mother-in-law, and that triggers the chain of events that we are particularly interested in.

It seems that the word about the miraculous healing got out... immediately. And right away Jesus became quite popular. “That evening at sundown they brought to Him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door.”

Just imagine what a success! The whole city gathered at the door... Waw! Wouldn't that be great, if we could do something like that! “Yes, Jesus, you are doing the right thing, people love it, they stream to you, the movement is growing, soon we will be really popular, we will have the biggest congregation!”

Imagine that you were among the disciples of Jesus. Is it that hard to relate to their excitement? They teacher is doing this cool stuff and people are responding. They have found the golden recipe to gather followers. Imagine how exciting!

I can relate to that. Almost every pastors' conference we reflect on the disheartening trends that we see in vast majority of Australian congregations. We are aging. People are leaving. The world doesn't love us anymore. Everything is so bad...

If only we could find the magical bullet. If only we could find something as appealing as Jesus' healing. At least something that people would like. Some magnet to attract them. Then we try to get creative, according to the level of our ignorance.

“Let's not talk about sin and repentance, for that puts people off. Let's promise healings and miracles, or maybe success in life, for that would appeal to many. Let's not expect anything from anyone, for people don't like commitment. Too hard.

Let's talk about something that everyone likes, something very practical. And for God's sake, let's not ask anyone to lead new and holy lives, for people like freedom.” There are numerous churches that try all these variations. These are among the largest congregations. It obviously works!

They want the same that the first disciples of Jesus wanted. To gather the crowds, to make this Jesus movement popular. Great thinking. Good marketing. Yet one person didn't see such approach as good. It was Jesus. He spoiled the party...

See, we know that our God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is gracious and compassionate God. He cares for us. He provides for us. He shelters us. He blesses us in countless ways day by day.

We all are recipients of His gifts, even if we don't recognize them. And from time to time, out of His compassion, He does something remarkable. From time to time He intervenes into our world and alters the natural order of things.

From time to time He grants healings that are miraculous, where doctors can only marvel admitting that they can't understand – how did that happen! Most of you would know of such stories. For many of you He has done exactly that.

Our God encourages us to pray for the sick, to pray for healing, to pray for good medical care and so on. Our prayers are never in vain, for our dear Lord Jesus takes them and places them before His Father. And by the way, the greatest gain may not be the healing itself, but the amazing experience of Jesus' loving presence with us.

However, and we need to be clear on this – and this reading helps us to see it, Jesus hasn't come to fix our problems in this life. Yes, He does it from time to time, but to fix our lives in this age, to remove all the difficulties and sufferings, to make us healthy and happy, that is not His main goal, regardless of what we may want.

The disciples said: “Let’s go back, let’s build of what begun so promising!” Jesus replied: “No, we are not going to do that. “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may *preach* there also, for that is why I came out.” And He went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.”

This is where we see Jesus’ way. They way of the true Church. Jesus hasn’t come to fix our lives, He has come to do something much greater – to give us new lives, already now, and especially in the age to come.

And that happens when the Word of God is preached and taught in all its truth and purity, as the Law and the Gospel, and when we as redeemed and beloved children of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, daily strive to lead new and holy lives.

This is why Jesus has come. To speak forth His life-giving and life-changing Word. “I love you! I want you! You are so precious to me! I give my life for you!” His message is not just words, it comes with the power of the Holy Spirit and it is the power for our salvations. Jesus speaks and new age dawns.

When we listen to the Word of God, wonderful changes take place. The Holy Spirit reveals to us our God’s unchanging, good and holy will for our lives, it shows our sinfulness and helps us to change our direction, seeking shelter with Jesus.

Then He speaks His Gospel to us. The Word of love, acceptance, affection, commitment, and God’s undeserved kindness renews us. Our rough hearts of stone are replaced with warm hearts of flesh. We begin to see everything differently.

We become different. More patient. More charitable instead of demanding. More gracious instead of self-righteous. More willing to listen and understand. Keen to forgive instead of condemn. Learning to pray even for those who sin against us.

This is what God’s love performs in us. We are transformed into new creation. Beautiful in grace and forbearance. Glorious in our kindness. All of this happens with us as Jesus embraces us with His Spirit, making us His family. All of this He gives to us as a free gift. Who wouldn’t want to receive such amazing gifts?!

But... as Jesus speaks, or as we as His messengers faithfully speak the whole council of God, **something else happens,** as we read it in our today’s reading. The Word of God comes with authority and power, and immediately it draws adversity.

Jesus words bring the Reign of God into our lives, they rescue us from under the power of the ruler of this age, the father of lies, and transfer us into the Kingdom of Christ. Such rescue mission is never welcomed. It is always resisted. Wherever Jesus went, His very presence drew demons to challenge Him. Whenever Jesus went, He met opposition. Remember Jesus’ warning to us:

“I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Mt 10:34) That is what happened. We need to notice who opposed Jesus. It wasn’t the world. It was the religious people, the false church. Those who believed they were better than others.

They didn’t need repentance. They didn’t need this forgiveness. They had their good works to throw into God’s face. How did they oppose Jesus? They tried to argue with Him, but that wouldn’t work. You can’t do anything against the truth, only for it.

That made them even angrier. Then they used the tools supplied by the ruler of this world. Aggression and lies. As Jesus Himself summarized: “You are of your father the devil ... He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him... for he is a liar and the father of lies.” (John 8:44)

See, this has been the situation in the Church since Jesus’ time. Whenever the Word of God is proclaimed in its truth and purity, with God’s authority, it draws opposition. It has always been that way, and it will always be that way.

For example, remember the Reformation, when the Gospel was rediscovered! The whole hell broke loose. Who told that it is going to be easy? “For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” (Mt 7:14)

We need to pick one way, one gate. The narrow one. Sure, we can try to do what the disciples initially wanted – to please people and to attract crowds by giving them what they want, as many do try.

Or, we can follow Jesus, preaching the Good News of the Kingdom of Heaven, letting the Word and the Spirit to do their work and ... sure, facing opposition and rejection, external and internal.

The sad reality is that in every congregation we have both these ways represented. Even more – these two ways are present in each one of us. The question is – which one will prevail? If the worldly way prevails, congregations become like social clubs, serving interests of its members and trying to please the world. This way may seem easier, some may hope that it will benefit them more, but the truth is – no Christian wants to find themselves where that road leads.

Or, by God’s undeserved grace, we may choose to stick with Jesus, to be the Church of Christ, where the whole truth is spoken. Where the power of the Gospel transforms people into new creation, where love and charity and kindness abound, and where the Gospel joy spills over in new and beautiful Christian lives.

Last Sunday we had our Grace-Bethlehem ministry review and it was a joyful and hopeful time together. The Lord has been gracious to us, quietly working His magic among us. He always does. I mentioned some of the positives in our newsletter. They are very encouraging.

Sure, we are far from perfect. Perhaps I am the least perfect, the one who needs God's grace the most, to help me to see my sinfulness and wash me clean, to renew me with the loving embrace of the Father, to help me to get up again, when I fall.

I am a poor and miserable sinner. Amen! And ... I am grateful to know it. I thank my Father for this knowledge, for I also know that Jesus hasn't come to save the righteous, He has come to save sinners, just like me. I hope that are other as well.

For when we come to Him as beggars, not as heroes, looking for forgiveness and healing, instead of revenge and my rights, then Jesus can bless us. Then He pours over you His love and forgiveness, He embraces you with His Spirit.

He fills you with His joy and surrounds you with His peace. Only those who are righteous and perfect – in their own eyes – they will walk away empty-handed complaining that “there was nothing for me”.

I pray that the Holy Spirit would enlighten us, that He would help us to see clearly the way of Jesus, that He would enable us to follow Jesus faithfully and charitably, even as it means to carry our crosses.

For if we follow Jesus, we know where the road leads. Through the hills and valleys of rejection and sufferings to the promised land of indescribable glory that already is prepared for us. Jesus already has made this trip. He is already waiting for you.

In your true home. We better hurry. And may Jesus bless us, that by His grace we can take many more with us.

Amen.