

A REFLECTION ON THE READINGS FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Mark 1: 29-39;

1 Cor 9:16-19, 22-23

When I was a small child, Mam was hardly ever ill but one occasion remains quite vivid in my memory. Illness had forced her to take to her bed. It fell to me and my younger brother and sister to ‘look after her.’ We relished the opportunity. It was probably the tea made with lukewarm water as well as the burnt toast that speeded her recovery as much as anything that had been prescribed by Doctor Goldman. In next to no time, she was downstairs and back at the stove preparing food and being maternal. I chuckle at the memory as, indeed, I always chuckle at today’s Gospel. No sooner has Jesus cured Simon’s mother-in-law, than she is waiting on them hand and foot. Oh, to be a man! *And the fever left her, and she began to wait on them.* It would be to miss the point completely if we were to become pre-occupied with stress and anxiety over ‘gender-stereotyping’. This isn’t the point that Mark is making. If we were to try and sum up the episode in one of those pithy catch-phrases much favoured by blond, follicularly challenged politicians either side of the ‘pond’ it would be: “Jesus serves that we might serve”. Jesus serves Simon Peter’s mother-in-law and brings respite from her fever and she repays the compliment by waiting on her guests. Her waiting on them is at one and the same time a recognition that Jesus has restored her to wholeness and her in turn advancing her own holiness through her service of him and his companions.

This weekend’s Gospel is about the ordinariness of Jesus’ life and the ordinariness of the lives that he touched. He is still going *all through Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out devils.* Crowds seek his company, hanging on to his every word, watching as he performed miracle after miracle and all the while, it remains so ordinary. He hasn’t sought out the rich or the influential. As I mentioned a couple of weeks back, for the time being Jesus shuns Jerusalem. The men of power and wealth are not his immediate concern. They would be deaf in any event, because their preoccupation was themselves and their status. Today, Mark instead opts to present us with a wonderfully ordinary scene of domesticity. Simon Peter has come home after some time away. That day, when he just dropped his nets and left the boat behind him must have caused his wife more than a little anxiety. We can feel for her. We can visualise her pacing the floor: ‘Where on earth has he got to?’ How she would have wanted to give him a piece of her mind – but she is more concerned with her mother. She is worried about her; the fever is not giving, and age is against her. Expecting an earbashing as he tries to explain away his absence, he instead finds himself acting as a go-between. ‘Can’t you get your friend to do something for my mother? I am really worried about her.’ Peter asks, Jesus responds, relief and hugs all around as domestic harmony is restored. A request carried on the wings of humility, a simple act of love and kindness bearing a cure that is still read about two thousand years later – and a Gospel is born.

The Gospel message is not rocket science, it is not dependent on might or power or fine oratory. It certainly is not dependent on wealth – in fact, wealth suffocates its simplicity. No! The Gospel message is one of tiny acts of selfless kindness, generosity of spirit (prayer) and body (the food parcel or meal prepared for the neighbour living on their own, the thoughtful ‘phone call, letter or email). The chains of lockdown may have imposed physical restrictions on our social interaction, but they cannot stifle our spirit. Ten acts of kindness from me this weekend, added to ten from you and ten from him and ten from her and ten from that one and we are soon approaching millions and billions of tiny acts of love that show our commitment to his teaching and his sacrifice. More importantly we are doing that which Paul calls for in today’s second reading: *Do you know what my reward is? It is this: in my preaching, to be able to offer the Good news (for) free.*