

5th Sunday after Epiphany 5th February 2012

Isaiah 40.21-31, 1 Cor 9.16-23, Mark 1.29-39

Paul uses the term 'the Gospel' about five times in today's NT reading, often alongside the word proclaim. Gospel is an old English word for good news or good story. When Paul talks about 'the gospel' he means several things - first the story about the life and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Secondly he talks about the effects of that story in the lives of men and women, and thirdly the meaning of that story on a cosmic scale. So he will talk about how through or in Christ we receive forgiveness of sin; how we from different cultures are made equal fellow-citizens of heaven by the death and resurrection of Jesus. He will talk about freedom in terms of freedom from condemnation in a cosmic court, in terms of freedom from having to live by rules and regulations under the law so that we might be right with God; he talks about how we have become the sons and daughters of God; how we as sinners have been raised to new life; how we have been given the Holy Spirit and are in fact the temple of the Holy Spirit both personally and as the church as a whole. He tells us that we can be transformed by the renewing of our minds because Christ lives in us and as a result we know God's will for us and all the world. All sorts of different meanings for individuals or communities as the story touches their lives in their context. He talks more universally about the death and resurrection of Jesus inaugurating a new age, called the kingdom of God which will be fulfilled when Jesus comes again. He talks about how in Jesus everything is made new. There is a new creation. The death life image is very powerfully linked with baptism and allows us to put the past behind and start new lives. That thought for some is extraordinarily powerful.

In Acts there are several examples of proclamation by Peter and by Paul. They cover the same ground when talking to Jewish people - the Messiah has come as promised by the prophets. He is Jesus of Nazareth who was descended from King David. He was crucified by the authorities but God justified him by raising him from the dead. We are witnesses to that. To people who were Greeks Paul proclaimed good news about Jesus differently. We all are aware of God as creator. This God has sent his son Jesus of Nazareth to set us free from the power of idols and reconcile all humanity to God. He was crucified but God raised him from the dead.

This difference in the way he proclaimed good news to two rather different cultural groups serves to illustrate something that Paul is at pains to talk about

in this passage which we heard today - how he enters the context of the people he is speaking to and uses those elements of the good story which speak to the situation people are in. It is an obvious thing to do in many ways. It is what is meant in the Diocesan Mission Plan in Key Mission Area 1 'creatively listening and telling the good news of Jesus'. You know how to tell the story so that it can be heard because you have listened. Listening first is respectful and means that when we do talk about Jesus we do that to fit a context.

In the other readings this principle is clear. The prophecy of Isaiah which we heard as the first reading is set in the context of the Exile. You can imagine what it might be like to be in exile - you are **forced** to leave your homeland. It is not unlike being a refugee. It is a very hard place to be. We can infer from this passage that the people wonder if God knows them or could ever rescue them. Into that context Isaiah speaks God's Word. The questions '*Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?*' beg the answer 'Yes of course we have.' Then he reminds them of and extends the scope of good news about God's power as creator; the difference in power between God and their oppressors (he just has to breathe on them and they will wither); he tells them that they are not hidden from God's sight but if they hang in there and pay attention to God they will find that their strength which has been drained away by the situation they are in will be restored. They will rise up as effortlessly and as freely as eagles do on an updraught. Good news in a very specific context. The prophet uses spoken word. In the Gospel reading Jesus uses actions as well as spoken word. This passage is one piece with the episode in the synagogue in Capernaum we heard last week where Jesus teaches with authority and demonstrates that same authority when a person with an unclean spirit causes a disturbance. In today's passage he heals Peter's mother-in-law. Both of those events are such good news that at the end of the day people gather round and he teaches and heals and gets rid of unclean spirits. His teaching is about God's ruling presence among the people and he demonstrates this with actions which transform lives. There is no real surprise when a crowd gathers next morning. He isn't there though, nor does he respond by attending to them. He has a message to proclaim about God's presence to transform lives. He has shown it to them. They have experienced it and he then moves on to the next place. I think it is a remarkable strategy. It is like he says I have shown you God, now you access this same presence and power through your faith and prayers and the

way that you treat each other. To do anything else would have created massive dependency on his physical presence. It mirrors too something else. That God's presence isn't limited to one place or time. He is Capernaum on the Sabbath both in synagogue and also in a home. The next day he is somewhere else. Sometimes he is in villages or towns, sometimes in deserted places. Always he responds to people where they are. Always people have a chance to learn from him and to start a journey of learning from him. Wherever he is God is. He enters particular contexts and responds with word or action which meets the need for God.

When **we** proclaim the gospel we are saying to others we have found this Jesus to be so important, so life changing for us, so much of a blessing that we would like you to have a similar experience and relationship. We don't do that without entering the context of the person or people we are with. God's grace is very particular. It is a love response and serves the good of the other.

What has been the effect of God in **your** life? What difference has putting your trust in Jesus made to **you** as a man or a woman? That is the Gospel according to (here insert **your** name).

What has that experience made you alive to in our society? For some it will be the plight of homeless people. For some it is the plight of people in poverty in other parts of the world. Some see health issues relating to this or that disease and get involved; some like Fred Hollows with a particular set of skills see how they could use those skills to transform the lives of the poor. Some are teachers in our schools who tell the story of Jesus so that students can understand the literature of our culture or the meaning of a festival. Some find themselves managing conflict between people at work and find the message of reconciliation and forgiveness in our scriptures enlightening and helpful. As we respond to issues and people **out of** our relationship to God and **with** God's love we become involved in God's mission and in spreading the gospel. If you think back over your life as a Christian you have done this more often than you think, often, like Jesus without using language that is seen as religious. By setting up parish mission plan we want to raise awareness of what you already do so you can make it more intentional - purposefully involved and more integrated with Christian spirituality.