**5th October 2014**

**Mark 1:29–39, Isaiah 40.21-31**

I got a pair of varifocals last week. I am now officially middle age – needing vari-focals because my eyesight is nether good for long distance nor short distance. The first time I wore them I tripped up on the stairs.

I’ve just been on a conference last week and one day the speaker shared about keep fit exercises for the middle aged. He said on day one you should stand with your legs apart and hold in both outstretched arms a 5lb bag of potatoes for five minutes. The next day you should do the same except his time you should hold a 10lb bag of potatoes in each hand for five minutes. The third day you should hold out a 50lb bag of potatoes for five minutes. On the fourth day, if you now feel strong enough, you should put a potato into each bag!

Keeping fit and healthy and having the right vision is of course important for the Christian life. It is one of the reasons why we are concentrating on belief this autumn and spring in our house groups. What we believe about God, humanity and the world affects how we see life and how we live. Some of the groups have been discussing how they read the bible, the next couple of studies will look at biblical belief about God, and how God works in the world. These are crucial building blocks of faith. Over this next month the themes in our services are about Jesus the healer. What do we believe about Jesus, about healing? Does God heal today?

The conference I was on this week was looking at the work of the Holy Spirit in growing the church and how we discern the guidance and leading of the Spirit. It was led by Paul Stokes who will be coming here in a couple of weeks’ time to lead our Ignite mini-conference looking at the role and work of the Holy Spirit. Paul is a good speaker, gentle and winsome. I’ve checked him out and he’ll bring a god message - can I encourage you to come and learn more about how God maybe at work in our lives and our church and our world.

During one seminar Paul got us to think about what he described as our Kairos moments – Kairos is an ancient Greek word for that moment in time when time stands still. You plod along in routine time then all of a sudden something extraordinary happens. In the context of faith, it is when God wants to act, when God shows up in a dramatic way.

I immediately thought about when I was a social work assistant working for Nottinghamshire Social Services. My boss was pushing for me to go and train to become a fully qualified social worker, yet people in my church were encouraging me to consider becoming a church minster. Let me tell you I didn’t want to become a church minister. I had a low regard for ministers, thought they got paid for doing nothing and that it wasn’t a proper job and the pay was peanuts. God would have to do something dramatic to get my attention.

I had visited a client who was a middle aged single man looking after his mother who suffered from osteoporosis, brittle bones. He had the form of diabetes that had caused macular deterioration, his eye sight was failing – he had restricted vision to the extent that he had to feel his way around the house he didn’t have peripheral vision. I was there to arrange for his mum to go into residential care. He was so distressed about his condition and the care for his mother that he got down on his knees and asked me to pray for him. I said I didn’t think that I could do that because I work for the County council but I promised him I would pray for him after work.

Social work is hard – you get all of society’s problems and are often blamed for them too. You learn to emotionally detach yourself from the situations you deal with in order to survive. However this man’s pleas got to me and that evening I was in tears for this man as I prayed to God for him.

The following week, having arranged care for his mother I went to visit him again this time with a trainee social worker who was on placement with me for the day to find out what I got up to. We knocked on the door and the man came out. When he saw me he hugged me and danced in the street with me. He had got his eyesight back: nearly fully restored. He said he had been to his doctor who couldn’t believe it. The trainee social worker was gobsmacked. I joked that these things only happen on a Thursday, but in reality I was shocked and shaken too.

The trainee social worker went back to the office because I had to go on to other clients. By the time I got back to base, the whole office had heard the story and I was met by incredulous silence followed by wise cracks about whether I could change the weather. My line manager called me in to check the story and after satisfying himself that I hadn’t been using County Council work time to share the Christian faith he then turned to me and said ‘I guess you are not going to become a social worker now’. He made the decision for me.

In many respects it would be much more straightforward to believe that healings and miracle don’t happen and that there is no spiritual world, just the material world, what you can see and touch. Many of course do believe this is all there is. Atheism is growing in our country and we don’t like stuff we can’t explain. But stuff like the story I have just recalled and other stories prevent me from believing that this is all there is.

It presents problems. What about all those who don’t get healed? What about those prayers that aren’t answered. There are tensions I our faith, partly because we have expectations – we have expectations of healings and miracles, we hope for God’s intervention, we believe there is an X factor in reality. I can’t answer these questions. I’m not an authority on that.

In Mark’s gospel which we will look at over the next few weeks, Jesus is presented as the one who has authority – both in his teaching and over sickness and evil spirits. He is sovereign and sometimes we just have to trust him.

Mark is trying to get us to put our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, who he believes is the Holy One of God, the name above all names, the one who speaks with authority; the one who has the power to heal the sick, cast out the demons and holds the keys to death and death’s domain.

The biblical writers urge us to trust in God – to look to the Lord for new strength – then we will soar on eagles’ wings, run and not feel faint. March on and not grow weary.

The accounts in the first chapter of Mark’s gospel are a frenzy of activity.

Jesus has come to Capernaum at the start of his ministry and is teaching in a synagogue and a man , described as having an unclean spirit, shrieks at him ‘what do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth. Have you come to destroy us?’ The implicit answer from Jesus is ‘yes I have come to destroy you’. But Jesus says ‘be silent’ and casts out the unclean spirit.

Ever since the first century, we Christians have struggled to define just what these unclean spirits are, just what these persons under possession are. Some have ventured to say that these diseases were first-century attempts to define mental illness. Others have said that some supernatural power was at work, or that we should not "define away" demonic possession.

Again it’s down to belief and expereince. I would say evil is real in our world. We only have to look at what is happening with the Islamic State extremists to see how they are gripped by an evil spirit.

We can have unclean spirits afflicting us. For example, anger, hatred, lust, envy, jealousy, for example – the demons that battle for our very souls. We still use that language: ‘our demons’.

Again my belief is that if you are a Christian, if you have received the Holy Spirit into your life you are not going to be possessed by something else, but we can all be affected by unclean thoughts and attitudes. A bit like bacteria, mucky stuff clings to us. We need help to clean it off. Sometimes those stains and bacteria are more resistant and we need a lot of help to free us from those demons.

Whatever way we define these "unclean" spirits, or these types of possession, the gospel of Jesus Christ compels us to deal with them.

Maybe Jesus would rather have talked about the hopes of his new ministry or about what love and justice and freedom are, but he was faced immediately by this man with an unclean spirit and he acted to free him.

"Be silent and come out of him," Jesus said to the man possessed by an unclean spirit. "And," the Gospel of Mark says, "The unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, did come out of him. They were all amazed."

When we come into the presence of Jesus there is usually a reaction. Something gives. We can realise we are unclean, while he is holy. Yet Jesus meets those who are unclean with love and mercy and wants to help them find freedom and release. That is the testimony of scripture. Countless peole came to Jesus, acknowledging who he was – many of them seen as crazy, mad, possessed – bu Jesus allowed them to come to him so that he could help them, clean them up, free them, liberate them. That is the essential definition of Christian healing.

Morris Maddocks, the former adviser to the Archbishops of Canterbury and York on the ministry of Health and Healing, says that Christian Healing is *Jesus Christ meeting you at your point of need*. Christian healing is Jesus Christ! It is he who comes to meet us at our point of need – a person, not some quick remedy or magical formula or potent medicine. It is Jesus Christ who heals and saves. An encounter with him is therefore going to accomplish far more than just the cure of symptoms.

When we talk about ‘healing’ we usually mean ‘curing’. When we pray for someone’s healing we are usually praying for this: that God will make them well. That maybe a perfectly legitimate prayer. But as Christians we know that God has a far greater blessing in store for that person, indeed for each one of us and other blessings may be more important at that moment in the suffering person’s journey than an instant cure. God transformed the evil of the cross into the greatest good for humankind

How can you know when you have been healed? Seems like an odd question. For many, the answer is obvious: when the pain is gone, the fever has come down, and the disease is no more. But the Gospel gives a better answer

The first chapter of Mark’s gospel is a frenzy of activity. Seeking rest at the home of Simon and Andrew, Jesus is called upon to heal Simon’s mother-in-law. Jesus reached out to this woman who was weak with fever, raised her up, and restored her to serve.

“The fever left her,” we are told of Peter’s mother-in-law, “and she began to serve them.” As she was healed, she immediately began to serve others.

When we are ready to help others in their need and focus once again outside ourselves we will know that we too have been cured. We will no longer be slaves to our hurts and resentments. We will at last be made whole. And we shall live.

Crowds begin to press in around the house, demanding more words and deeds of power from Jesus. In the midst of all of this and in the heart of our story for today, Jesus goes out to a deserted place to pray. It isn’t much of a break from the action for Jesus. The disciples follow and right away they implore Jesus to get back on the road. In that brief time apart, Jesus found renewed energy in God, the source of his strength.

Isaiah calls God’s people to remember that God– who created the universe and rules everything within it – is their source of strength.. The prophet reminds them of God’s power to restore and liberate, and of God’s desire to renew their strength.

Jesus drew from this source of strength as his authority for healing and teaching. With Jesus, we are invited to trust in the power of God, who promises: “I will raise you up on eagles’ wings.”

The story is told of a little boy and his father. They were walking along a road when they came across a large stone. The boy looked at the stone and thought about it a little. Then he asked his father, "Do you think if I use all my strength, I can move that rock?"

The father thought for a moment and said, "I think that if you use all your strength, you can do it."

That was all the little boy needed. He ran over to the rock and began to push on it. He pushed and he pushed, so hard did he try that little beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. But the rock didn’t move — not an inch, not half an inch. After a while, the little boy sat down on the ground. His face had fallen. His whole body seemed to be just a lump there on the earth. "You were wrong," he told his dad. "I can’t do it."

His father walked over to him, knelt beside him, and put his arm around the boy’s shoulder. "You can do it," he said. "You just didn’t use all your strength. You didn’t ask me to help."

The world in which we live tells us that it is all up to us. It tells us that we have to be strong and independent. It tells us we can’t and shouldn’t count on anyone or anything else. And yet, what faith tells us and what Jews and Christians have known forever is that we have a ready resource in God, strength for those who ask.

May you discover in Christ the one who heals and delivers. May you discover in prayer the strength to be renewed in the love of God: to run and not feel faint, to walk on and not grow weary.