

**8<sup>th</sup> February, 2015.**

**Reading: Mark 1: 29 - 39**

**Sermon: A Clear Focus Needed**

For the last two Sundays, we have been considering the questions raised in the Church Review which had to do with outreach, namely, how we share the good news of Jesus Christ with others and how we help others to become Christians. Those have been quite challenging questions and ones which we have not yet answered fully, not by a long chalk.

The first week, I said that I wasn't convinced I could answer the questions and then last week, the focus was on the need for a change of mind-set and a willingness to relate well to other people.

With regard to the fishermen, their focus changed from things to people, and we gave some consideration to the fact that our focus needs to be, not on numbers and targets, but on good relationships. We also saw that we had to guard against a situation developing where there is a 'them' and an 'us', fishers of men and the fished.

In some ways, the questions create that kind of situation. How do **we** share with others? How do **we** help others? The focus is on **us** doing and others having something done to them or given to them.

Again, it seems like a one way process and yet it can't be because our work has to focus on relationships with others and that has to be a two way process. The basis for those relationship is our love of God and our love of our neighbour and ourselves, as we saw last week.

This week, when I read our Scripture Reading for today, rather than clarifying the situation, it seemed to add to the confusion. Maybe confusion is too strong a word. Maybe it would be more accurate to say that our reading for today gave us something else to consider as we try to work out what it is that we are called to do in terms of outreach. This week's reading is certainly a challenge for ministry.

What we see in this reading is Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law and many others who are sick or possessed by demons. Very easily, healing could have become the focus of Jesus' ministry, just as it becomes the focus of ministry for some others in this day and age.

When Jesus took time away from the crowds to pray, the disciples tell him that everyone is searching for him. Everyone was ready to make demands on his time. So what did Jesus do? Did he rush back to where the

crowds were so that he could meet their demands on his time and their demands for healing? In a way, it wasn't unreasonable to expect that he would do that, knowing that He could help people who were clearly in desperate need. Nor was it unreasonable for them to go to Him for help. After all, would we not have done the same? We still take people to Jesus who need His healing hand upon them, albeit in prayer but, in this instance, during His earthly ministry, what did Jesus do?

He certainly didn't meet the expectations of either His disciples or the crowd. When the disciples found Him, after hunting all over for Him and told him: **Everyone is searching for you**, His response was **Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do**. He walked away from the crowds. He walked away from the demands of the people He came to save, people who were clambering for his attention. However, it is to be assumed that He had already proclaimed the message of salvation, the message of life to them.

To walk away takes courage but it also demonstrates a clear focus on the part of Jesus. He knew that His calling was to proclaim the message; and not to visit, not to heal, not to feed, not to meet the demands of the crowd. For Jesus, His ministry was about sharing the good news through what He said.

Is that what ministry should be about? Should it simply be about preaching and teaching, about Bible Study and about prayer because after all, ministers are ordained to Word and Sacrament? We are not ordained to meetings, to visiting, to fundraising, to form-filling, to craft work, to networking and yet there is an expectation that, as ministers, we will do all those things as well, perhaps to the detriment of our preaching and teaching, perhaps to the detriment of our sharing of the good news of Jesus Christ.

But you know, I can't help wondering what everyone thought about Jesus when He continued on His way. Were the crowds critical of Him? Were the disciples critical of Him behind His back? Did everyone decide that He didn't care? Did they think that He wasn't doing His job properly, whatever they thought that job might be, simply because He wasn't meeting their expectations?

Those are certainly the things which are said about ministers when we fail to meet the expectations of our congregations or of some of our

members. Is that cause for concern? It certainly wasn't a cause for concern for Jesus and we are called to follow Jesus, not to follow the crowd, not to be people pleasers. But that, too, is a challenge for ministry and not just for ministers.

Very often, when we are considering the way forward, we think we should consult the crowd. We carry out surveys. We hold meetings. We hold consultations. We try to find out what people want? We try to provide services in a format which we think people will like or accept rather than rocking the boat. That's called people pleasing.

What the crowd wanted from Jesus was not something that He was prepared to offer, at least, not all of the time. He wasn't there to meet what they considered to be their needs but to do what He knew, in the long run, would meet their deepest needs.

Now that way of thinking goes against all the strategies used in Health Care, in Politics and in decision making in so many different areas of life. That way of thinking would be frowned upon nowadays and yet that was how Jesus carried out His ministry. He did what He considered to be right.

However, when we look at the passage closely, we see that there was also a balance to Jesus' ministry. He did heal and He did cast out demons, and He did visit and He did socialise but in doing those things, He never lost sight of why He was here. He never lost sight of His greater purpose and when He needed to, He walked away from those things to focus on proclaiming the message to the people who had not yet heard it. His focus was very clearly on outreach.

How do we see our role as outreach workers because that is what each of us is called to be? An outreach worker. Are we so caught up in whatever the present day equivalent of healing and casting out demons would be for us that we have no time left to proclaim the message? Are the scales so heavily tipped in one direction that we fail to meet our calling as Christians to share the good news, the message of salvation and of life and of hope.

As Barry Dunmore, who has the burden of being a Church of Scotland minister in the Bahamas, says on the Church of Scotland website, that sometimes we need to move on from the things that consume too much of our time and energy. I will add to that, that we need to move on so that we can focus on what it is that we are actually called to do.

Jesus' time and energy was being taken up with demands to heal and

that led to him saying to His disciples that it was time to move on to the neighbouring towns so that He could proclaim the message there also.

This almost sounds like a farewell sermon but I have no plans to move on in that sense. What I am planning to do is look at the way forward because it is time to move on in terms of refocusing our ministry here in Lochgilphead. We need to look at where the path ahead is leading and we need to have the courage to walk down that path for the good of those who have not yet heard the message.

Our ministry cannot be about pleasing the crowd. It has to be a response to our calling which is to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. That is a calling to which we have all responded in different ways and it's time for each of us to examine our response and to refocus for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The question still remains, however, as to how we do that. That is the real challenge and that's the challenge which is issued to us by the questions in the Church Review. How do we share the good news of Jesus Christ with others and how do we help others to become Christians? Maybe if we spend enough weeks looking at this theme, we will come up with the answers together.