

# Healing and service

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Epiphany + 5 – Healing Sunday – Mark 1.29-39

Jesus heals Peter's Mother-in-Law and she gets straight up to serve everyone. I remember years ago reading this story and feeling as if she got a bit of a raw deal. And I must confess to having harboured this misgiving until recently. I disclosed this misgiving to a notable Biblical scholar who reminded me of something Jesus said later in this Gospel – <sup>10.45</sup> 'the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve'. It's a teaching we see in two of the other gospels <sup>(Mt 20.28 and Jn 13.1-17 footwashing)</sup>, so scholars see this *service* teaching as 'normative' – as essential to the nature of Jesus and his followers – as a standard by which we understand other parts of the Gospel.

What that means in today's case is that for Peter's Mother-in-Law, being healed and enabled to get up and serve identifies her in the Gospel as someone who is like Jesus; as someone who serves. Her healing by Jesus restored her as someone who provides hospitality – an extremely high value in her culture, and in the Gospel. Her healing by Jesus restored her honour and dignity to her, and affirmed her ministry. That's healing – it's far more than a cure.

This particular sort of healing still happens today. I want to tell you about someone I used to visit in the burns unit of the Royal Adelaide Hospital. He'd been badly burnt in a house fire – he'd gone back in to save his dog. During these visits, there were three things that I marvelled at. The first was the bed he was on. The second was the eternity it seemed to take for the healing process to inch forwards. But most amazing was the honouring of this man's humanity and dignity that was so much a part of his recovery – or as I see it, his *rebirth*.

*The bed.* On one visit, he invited me to sit on the bed because there wasn't a chair in the room. For a little while, everything seemed normal. But then, very gently, a wave seemed to go under me. It lifted me up and tilted me to one side. It felt like being in a rubber boat on the sea. I didn't like to mention it at first, but it happened a few more times, and when I'd developed a bit of a list to starboard, he saw the look on my face and explained it to me. His bed did this all the time, so that no part of his skin would have to bear the pressure of his body-weight for longer than a few minutes.

*Eternity.* I marvelled at how much time it took his skin to heal. From one visit to the next, his progress seemed unbelievably slow. He seemed to be cut off from time, cocooned in a room by himself, receiving the most frequent, and the most unbelievably painstaking care you could imagine. From visit to visit, with a sort of time-lapse photographic view, I watched his hands and arms, his scalp, his chest and his back being progressively given back to him.

*Rebirth.* But I said he surprised me too. It surprised me that he got well again at all, considering how he'd looked when things started. He came to talk often about how he'd come to understand that God wanted him to stay around for a bit longer. And he wanted to find out why; what was it that God wanted him to do. I believe an important part of what moved him to this point was the way the burns-unit staff treated him. They didn't know who or what he was in life (*he was on an invalid pension and lived in a housing trust unit*); they simply devoted themselves to this human being's comfort, and to his recovery.

For the rest of us looking on, these staff were the way God answered our prayers for our friend. Their conduct spoke clearly of how God wanted his dignity and significance as a person to be honoured. And he was given much more than his old sense of self by this. He was cured, but also healed – past wounds of the soul were also addressed by the respect and care

he was given.

The time, the patience, the delicacy of each change of dressings, the bed designed to preserve him from the degradation of further agony – in all this, he came to know that God cherished him, and wanted him to stay alive. And his life from then on became a quest to figure out what God wanted him to do with it. Healing is more than a re-instatement of what was; it's a furthering of the process of creation. So our friend was given something more than he had before he was injured – he was given a new life. And he decided to dedicate his new life to God who gave it to him; he committed himself to do whatever it was that God wanted of him. And he sought that purpose within the context of a community of friends he knew loved and cared for him.

I pray God's continued blessing on our regular healing ministry.

Amen