

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

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By Ruth Harvey

Introduction

In this season of 'ordinary time', after the extraordinary events of epiphany, we explore Jesus' life of ministry, reconciliation, healing and wholeness as he walks, like a wild-fire of hope, through the people who are hurting. And we ask: how may we be these healing hands, eyes and hearts in the world?

Text

Mark 1: 29-39

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' He answered, '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.' And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Comment

There are some phrases that stand out in this text, each of which point to the re-awakening of the divine within the grit and guddle of life:

'took her by the hand'

Jesus took Simon's mother-in-law by the hand and she was healed. Significantly verse 1 reminds us that this miraculous moment took place not in the holy shrine of the synagogue but in the sacred space of an ordinary home, in the place where the sick woman lived. This table-turning in the first sentence of this paragraph, where

home becomes holy, is mirrored by the role-reversal in the last sentence where the one served becomes the servant. Throughout we are reminded: 'stay awake; look out for moments where the mighty fall and the humble are raised.' It takes 8 strong people – that's 16 hands – to turn a covid-19 patient over safely so they may live. In a world so devoid of touch, so many hands are still deftly lifting, touching, turning, healing. The healing touch of health care and emergency workers offers the miracle of life. Let's remain awake to the power of the possible in the impossibly ordinary moment.

'the whole city was gathered around the door'

Jesus' healing ministry and the impact of his presence, his touch, had quickly reached every household – are at least if not every single household, if this is biblical exaggeration, then a huge number of people had heard about the impact he was making. As quickly as the fever was spreading amongst the people, so was the knowledge of healing, or transformation.

In a powerful series of 'upstander' stories from the context of the Troubles in Ireland, I heard of a man who, faced with the violent words of unsavoury songs on the football terrace, took it upon himself quietly and gently to sing a different song. He raised his voice gently with a song devoid of the hateful words. And it spread until all in the stadium were singing, transformed from a mob to a crowd.

In the world of conflict transformation we know that 'the weight of each word counts.' We know that an ill word can spread hate as quickly as a healing word can spread hope. And so we, who belong to the cosmic 'whole city', we who follow Jesus, must notice those times when our words or actions are ill-weighted, and to lift up those times when our words can spread peace, like wild-fire.

'there he prayed'

In the Iona Community we pray for healing. Each Tuesday we join together in a service of prayers for healing which, when we are able, includes the laying on of hands. We believe in the power of prayer and of touch to 'lift up' individuals and situations beyond pain and trouble. We also pray for the healing of the nations, re-dedicating ourselves each time we pray to putting our hands – and our hearts and our minds – to work to transform conflict, to listen with the intent to be changed, to walk towards the difficult conversation, to write letters and press our politicians to make decisions in favour of the most marginalised. In our daily lives, in the drudgery of tasks and chores and unresolved issues, we pray as we work, imbuing each moment with 'the glory in the grey.' This is not always easy. But it is transformative. This is how we pray. How do you pray?

Response

How do you pray? Reflect on your experiences of healing. Consider how the words we use and the stance we each take daily can spread healing and hope, like the touch of Jesus. Explore [Go Health](#), a resource for faith communities dedicated to healing and wholeness.

Prayer

Adapted from a prayer by George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community

Lord Jesus, you are above us
you are before us.
You are beneath us;
you are within each one of us.

We are your temple not made with hands.
We are your body.
If every wall should crumble,
and every church decay,
we are your habitation.

Nearer are you than breathing,

closer than hands and feet.
Ours are the eyes with which you,
in the mystery,
look out in compassion on the world.

So we bless you for
your directing of us,
your redeeming of us,
and your indwelling.

Take us outside, Lord,
outside holiness,
out to where the nurses touch
and the politicians clash
at the cross-roads of the world.

And so may our words and our lives
be justified.

Amen

Further Reading

Friends, we are delighted to let you know that there is a new book coming from some of the Spirituality of Conflict writers. Pádraig Ó Tuama, and our dearly beloved and dearly missed Glenn Jordan, wrote a book on reading contemporary anxieties about Borders through the lens of the Hebrew Book of Ruth. [You can order the book from Canterbury Press](#), or join one of the book launches on zoom at [7pm Irish/British time on 15th February](#), or at [7pm New York time on the 15th February](#).