**Mark 1:29-39**

**God [not] in a Box**

What are your expectations of Jesus?

As Christians, we would all claim to be a follower of Jesus and we would all claim to be in a relationship with him. But what are your expectations of how he might impact your life? As with any relationship, it is something we grow into and our expectations change over the years as we gain more experience together. But it is far too easy to get stuck with a fairly naïve, perhaps even immature expectation of Jesus’ activity in our lives…

For many people, they never move beyond treating Jesus a little like the Genie in the Lamp: if I pray to him and ask him for things, then I expect him to respond to me and give me what I ask for and I will get angry with him if he doesn’t deliver and maybe even stop coming to worship him altogether.

That Genie in a Lamp mentality doesn’t represent the fullness of relationship that we are called to enjoy with Jesus. But it is very common amongst many people and it was particularly prevalent amongst the people who first knew Jesus when he began his ministry in Palestine 2,000 years ago.

The story that we have just heard read from Mark’s Gospel is fundamentally about a misunderstanding of who Jesus and what should be expected from him in a relationship. So let’s think about this passage a little more deeply and think about what we can learn from it, for ourselves, today.

Jesus performed hundreds and hundreds of healings during his earthly ministry and not all of them are recorded in the four Gospels. So the Gospel writers were very careful about which healing stories they included in their accounts of Jesus’ life and they chose certain stories to teach us specific things about Jesus, and the onus is on us to try and get beneath the skin of these stories to see what they want us to learn.

On one level – on a surface level - it is pretty obvious why Mark included this one about the healing of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law. Mark gleaned the information for his Gospel primarily from the reminiscences of Simon Peter, so it would seem fairly likely that this particular healing of a family member would be close to Simon’s heart: of course he would want it recorded for posterity. But I think there is more to it than that, so let’s go a little more deeply…

In the first two verses, 29 and 30, we twice come across this word ‘immediately’: verse 29: “And immediately they left the synagogue…” verse 30: “And immediately they told him about her…” What is going on here? Mark is trying to stress the fact that there is urgency on the part of the followers of Jesus. Why might they be in such a hurry?

Well, they have been with him in the synagogue and they have just watched him heal a man with an unclean spirit and Simon’s mind must have been racing Here is a healer – a miracle man! “How else can we use his powers? I know – my mother-in-law is sick: let’s get him to heal her too!” So his followers rush him out of the synagogue and want to utilise his gifts for their own ends, perhaps a little bit like the genie in the lamp: there to grant wishes.

And as I say, there is something a bit like that in all of us, isn’t there? When we pray, how often do we treat God like a genie in the lamp; hoping that he will grant our every wish, our every desire? Here we are in a relationship with Almighty God who has all power and all authority and the temptation is always there, isn’t it, to ask him to do things for us that we want him to do. Not that there is anything wrong in praying for ourselves, of course; but we must always attend closely to our motivations and try our best to ensure that we are not being driven by selfish desires.

And then, in verse 32, the problem becomes exacerbated: “That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon possessed.” Clearly word was spreading about this new miracle worker in their midst and now, everyone wanted a piece of the action. As Mark says in verse 33, “The whole town gathered at the door…”

Jesus had healed the man in the synagogue and so the disciples first – and then the whole town begin to define who Jesus is: he is a miracle worker. Jesus begins to be put in a box by those who see him in action; he is put into the box of their choice and they begin to relate to him in a particular way that best meets their own, specific needs. But already, they have moved so far from the beginning of the story; the way they are relating to Jesus already is a far cry from how he had introduced himself to them just a few days before, which was as a Messenger from God with a Message for the People.

Within days, Jesus has become objectified as a miracle worker who can meet their every need and that is how the people of Israel begin to relate to him.

Nevertheless, Jesus’ compassion transcends the misunderstanding of the people and we read in verse 34 that he “healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons…”

There is an interesting paradox in this bit of the story as the people begin to forge a relationship with Jesus. Clearly, they want to utilise his power because they are bringing the sick to him and in verse 32, it says, “they brought to Jesus all the sick…” But in that same verse, we are also told that this constant stream of people began “after sunset” and that is significant because the Sabbath ended at sunset so it would then have been within the religious law for them to carry sick people through the streets. So we see the people caught in an interesting situation: they are thirsting for something new; the power of this new miracle worker - but they are still residing within the purity laws of Judaism; waiting until after sunset to come to him. Caught in the tension between the new and the old, between a living faith and ritualism: which, of course, is where most of us find ourselves in our Christian journey and that is why Mark wants to include this story.

It is more than just a story about Jesus’ healing power: he is continuing to really drive home his key point so far; that Jesus represents something new and, if we want to experience a relationship with God through Jesus, we need to open ourselves up to the new, and not just reside in empty tradition…

And so we come to verse 35: “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a wilderness place, where he prayed.” And we are told in verse 35 that he prays there; finding himself in the wilderness alone with his God is a moment of reconnection for Jesus. A moment of deep intimacy in which he can breathe deeply and be himself with his Father. A beautiful moment…

But look what happens, verse 36: “Simon and his companions went to look for him…” Those pesky people just won’t leave him alone! They want their miracle worker back! How dare he just walk out in the middle of the night! They’ve got more healings and exorcisms lined up for him.

And isn’t it interesting that Mark doesn’t call them “the disciples”: he calls them “Simon and his companions”. Why is that? Because, quite simply, they weren’t behaving like disciples at this point! They weren’t following their Lord in humble obedience. Instead, they were still treating Jesus like a genie in the lamp. “Come on Jesus, get off your knees, get back to Capernaum: there’s work for you to do!”

Simon and his companions are hunting Jesus down. They are hassling him, they are harassing him, reminding him just how much he is needed as a miracle worker! But Jesus is having none of it…Verse 38: ‘Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so that I can preach there also. For that is why I came out”.’

There’s a couple of things to notice about this verse. Firstly, Jesus says that he wants to move on to other villages, and the phrase he uses is: “So that I can preach there also”. No mention of healings, no mention of exorcisms but only that he has a message to bring…Again, Mark is contrasting Jesus’ self-understanding with the expectations of the crowd. He wants to preach – they want him to perform miracles. Secondly, notice what he says: “For that is why I came out”. Many English Bibles translate this wrong; they usually say, “That is why I have come”, or something similar but the Greek doesn’t say, “That is why I have come”, it says “That is why I came out”. The difference is important because if we translate it, “That is why I have come”, we can read this as a statement by Jesus about his ministry and vocation in its totality. But if we translate it directly from the Greek, “That is why I came out”, it is a comment on the fact that Jesus has come out of Capernaum and Peter’s house and that takes on a completely different meaning…

Jesus is saying that he came out of Capernaum and Peter’s house because he wants to escape from people’s wrong expectations of him: he is not a tame miracle worker; he is a man with a message about the Kingdom of God and he must come out of the box they have put him in in order to preach that message. Jesus will not be contained in their box. Jesus will not be contained in your box, or mine…he is not a genie in the lamp; he is the Son of God will an entirely different mission…

And Mark really pushes this point home in verse 36: “So he travelled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.” Notice that he doesn’t say, “Preaching in *the* synagogues…” but “Preaching in *their* synagogues…” Again, Jesus is pictured by Mark as distancing himself from the traditions and institutionalism of the established faith. Even though this is Jesus’ home district, Mark speaks of him as if he is a visitor; it’s *their* synagogues he preaches in All the conventions of a comfortable faith are ‘theirs’, not ‘his’…

So, in conclusion, we see again Mark’s agenda that he is driving home to us: Jesus will not be put in a box: it doesn’t matter what box you want to put Jesus in. Jesus refuses to sit in it. He will not be turned into a consumer product. He will not identify with your desire, my desire, to turn him into a genie in the lamp.

But, whilst that is true, the amazing truth of the grace and love of Jesus is that, even though the crowds and the first disciples got it so wrong, he never chastised them, he did not get angry with them. He did not turn his back on them, or refuse their demands…Even though they misunderstood him, he still, out of love, met them in their need.

And so he is with us today: we may not have a perfect understanding of who Jesus is, we may not relate to him as we should, we may treat him inappropriately, but he will not forsake us or turn his back on us out of frustration. His love for us transcends our ignorance, our selfishness.

Certainly, we need to grow up and mature in the faith. But in the meantime, whilst we still behave like spoilt brats who have all the answers and silly children who want to snap our fingers and have the Messiah come running, he will never forsake us. Such is the love of God for us and we are eternally grateful for his forbearance and forgiveness.