

Mark 1:29-39

Sunday 7th February 2021

Stuart Vince

An Ordinary Sunday

I have just sat down at my desk to write this sermon, and the first thing that I did was to look at the readings that are listed in the lectionary for 7th February. This Sunday is the 5th Sunday after Epiphany in the church's year, and looking at this title I thought 'Oh, just an ordinary Sunday – no festivals or anything special'. Then I read the passage from Mark. Mark says that Jesus has been to the Synagogue to worship on the Sabbath. I thought was this just an 'ordinary Sunday' for Jesus?

It is just about a year since we started to take notice of what was happening in that little know city in China, Wuhan and the first diagnosis of Covid-19 was made in this country. A year ago, the ordinary Sunday for most for us would have included a trip to church to worship together with our church family. We would have chatted with various members of the congregation, perhaps sat next to an acquaintance, sung hymns and perhaps taken the sacrament from the altar rail if it was a Holy Communion service. During the service, I would have stood at the front of the church in my robes and delivered this sermon to you. We would have then enjoyed coffee and biscuits together (cake if we were lucky) and people would have told me how marvellous my sermon was (I wish!). We never thought that meeting together, singing or spending time with other people was anything special.

Now look at what our normal Sunday looks like. We cannot meet in church. We cannot meet our friends or family. We cannot go out of our house unless for some specified reason or for exercise. If we do go out, we pick where we go with thought about our safety. We wear masks. We clean our hands with sanitiser at every opportunity. We move aside if someone approaches us. We wash our hands as soon as we get home. For me, these actions have become automatic, 'ordinary' if you like. Some of you may watch Songs of Praise at lunchtime on Sunday, and I know that when Janine my wife and I watch we find it so strange to see hymns being sung by a church packed out with people sitting next to each other, all singing energetically and not a mask in sight. Such a sight is extraordinary, something that now looks strange and not quite right. I now worship using a laptop via the internet and it has been many weeks since I set foot in church. In a year, our concept of what is an 'ordinary Sunday' has been completely changed. The extraordinary has become ordinary, and the ordinary has become extraordinary.

An ordinary Sabbath

Perhaps this was an ordinary Sabbath for Jesus. If it was, then just look how extraordinary life with Jesus was. Jesus leaves worship at the Synagogue. During the service Jesus confronted and cast a demon from a man in the congregation, so the service for the congregation must have been something special. Jesus goes to the house of the disciples Simon and Andrew. They find Simon's mother-in-law ill in bed with a fever, and Jesus cures her.

During his ministry, Jesus has several confrontations with priests and the pharisees over 'working' on the Sabbath, which was banned by the Law. Luke describes such a reaction – 'Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on

those days, not on the Sabbath.” (Luke 13:14). Healing Simon’s mother-in-law would have been regarded by the strict followers of the Sabbath Law as work. Jesus regarded doing what needed to be done in emergencies on the Sabbath as being exempt from the law, and healing was such an action. The Law was something that was constructed by humans, not God, and complying with the Law was a requirement imposed by humans. God is a God of mercy and love, and healing is showing mercy and love through God’s grace.

When the Sabbath constraints ended at evening time, people were free to move around again. The house of Simon and Andrew became surrounded by crowds with sick and ill people seeking healing from Jesus. Jesus must have spent many hours healing, and as he often does after working with crowds of people, afterwards Jesus goes off by himself to pray and be close with God. So ends an ordinary Sabbath with Jesus.

How ordinary is ordinary?

Just imagine what you would have been thinking if you had been a neighbour of Simon and Andrew their families who live in this house. Mother-in-law, who was healed, suggests that the household is an extended family. Simon is married and his wife would be there. Did he have children? He may have done. Andrew could be married and have family in the house. They were just normal working guys and here they are with Jesus – the man who claims to be the Messiah, the saviour of the country and who performs miracles of healing. You find that the house is surrounded by an excited crowd clamouring to get at Jesus. There is great excitement as the sick are healed. Celebrations at the cure of long-standing sickness. The whole of the town seems to be there. Ordinary sleepy quiet day of rest? It must have been a strange, exciting day that would be remembered in the town for many years.

If you were that neighbour of Simon and Andrew and accepted and believed what Jesus was teaching, then Sabbath days would never be ordinary again. Just look at the passage written by St Paul to the church in Corinth about thirty years after this ordinary Sabbath day. Paul used to be a Pharisee, one of those who strictly obeyed every nuance of the Law. He was one who tried to kill the young church after the death of Jesus. He was there when Stephen was killed because of his belief in Jesus. He was commissioned by his religion to persecute, arrest and imprison anyone who believed in Jesus.

Just look how he changed after he encountered Jesus in his life. His adherence to the law has gone. All he is interested in is telling others of Jesus and the message that Jesus brings. He will join any group be they strict Jews, lax Jews or non-Jews in order to spread this word. His behaviour and purpose in life has been completely turned around. Paul’s ‘ordinary’ sabbath days would have been turned into the extraordinary sabbath day of Jesus by Paul listening to the Lord.

Let our Sunday be out of the ordinary

Jesus turns things upside down. He challenges the normal, what we expect to happen and changes personal worlds by what he says to us and shows us. Look at our passage from Paul’s letter. If we want to share in the gospel, in what Jesus promises to us if we believe in him, then we must live for others. Although we are ‘free with respect to all’ we must make ourselves ‘a slave to all so that we win more’ and bring the gospel of Christ to others in our lives. If we listen, if we do follow Jesus, then we will be like Paul.