

Sermon on Mark 1: 29-39

An Inconvenient Faith

Focus Sentence: The Gospel of Jesus' love and grace which calls us to live lives of service and suffering inconveniences our presuppositions from our own faith all the way through to our living day by day.

Not that long ago I was going home after a busy day.

It had consisted of the usual interactions and conversations of a normal day in ministry, if there is such a thing.

I was pretty tired and looking forward to getting home.

There was just one problem.

On my list of things to do, I had fallen one short. In the busy-ness of the day, I hadn't been able to get to see someone in the nursing home I had been meaning to see.

She was an older lady who had not been well and was coming to the end of her days on earth. But amid other things going on, I'd just not gotten there.

When I drove out the gate of the church at about 5pm I felt satisfied with the day.

Much had happened and things had been achieved, and now I was going home.

Then, as I turned onto the long straight part of Bowral Street, like a freak wave crashing into the pier, it occurred to me that I'd not seen her yet.

Now there's a lot of time for thinking on Bowral Street on that long straight road.

At 50kms/hour it seems to go on interminably.

Yet it does terminate at the T junction in the distance.

I knew when I got there I'd be faced with the choice to turn right for home, or left for the nursing home.

And oh didn't the rationalisations begin.

While I knew in my heart it was important to go, I looked for many ways out.

What difference will my visit make anyway at this stage?

I can see her tomorrow surely? I'm tired. I'm hungry.

Look how much I've done today after all.

(We can be so good at self justification I thought later)

As the corner came closer I decided, no, I'm going home.

Tomorrow is another day. That's it.

Strangely, though, when it came to it, almost against my will the car seemed to insist on turning left, and quickly I found myself driving up the Old South Road Hill to the Abbey Nursing Home amid my inner protests.

I really only spent 15 minutes or so with her as she was asleep already.

I prayed for her, spoke briefly with her daughter who was there and then left.

As I left I wondered whether I shouldn't have just left it until the next day.

Whether she had heard my prayers anyway.

I hoped God was in it somewhere, working in spite of my own fallen ruminations.

Well, I got my answer the next day when she died. Forgive me Lord, I said quietly to myself, and thank you.

I'm guessing all of us have a story or two like that one.

A remembrance of a time when we really didn't want to be doing something, it was just inconvenient, but by some holy impulse or strength (perhaps like me even amid some less than charitable thoughts, oh how our sins are ever before us) we went anyway, and came away later feeling that we were glad we did.

I led the funeral a few days later feeling very thankful I had gone.

And thankful to God that at that moment, for whatever reason, he had inconvenienced me to turn left and visit a saint of the church in the last throes of her life, a day before she died.

Christianity is an inconvenient faith.

Just when you think your course is set and you're content with where you're headed, God turns you in a different direction, perhaps facing a path you would prefer not to take.

And given our predilection to want our own way, on our own terms, it'll likely be a far bigger inconvenience than we think, but in the service of love.

If you want comfortable living, with little interruption or cost, where you can set your own sail, make your own choices, run your own race without giving heed to the cries of the world, following Jesus is not really for you.

If you want your own safety, and low risk, and contented convenience in your own time and at your own pace, following Jesus is not really for you.

If you want private religion which only takes place in your inner being without recourse to the world of politics and human turmoil, following Jesus is really not for you.

Am I being a little over dramatic? Yes, a little – preacher's prerogative you see.

Are we so often inclined to take the convenient route and so requiring of some holy inconvenience? the divine spark of Jesus' love that turns us in a direction we didn't think we were going?

Absolutely.

Jesus is the great inconvenience to the powers of darkness that would seek to rule us and the world.

And they are legion.

Personally, we need only consider the inner stirrings of our hearts to know just how attracted we are to less than faithful options.

Like a great malign magnet that constantly pulls us in the wrong direction.

Collectively, our daily newspaper reminds us over and over how pervasive the powers of darkness are in our world.

In Kabul, a suicide bomber packed an ambulance, yes, an ambulance, with explosives in the ultimate act of twisted irony, killing over 100 people.

This is of course an extreme example, but less dramatic patterns of our collusion with the powers of darkness are everywhere.

In the 1990s Jerry Springer a former politician pioneered a whole new brand of reality TV which fed off creating live animosity between people.

It would start with some pre-existing hostility and escalate from there until there were physical attacks.

And as there was the audience cheered and the ratings soared.

It turned out we liked watching people fighting on television to the point of physical violence, though perhaps we were less likely to admit it.

The final insult was when at the end of the show Jerry would give a little moral lesson about cultivating loving relationships, as if his success hadn't been achieved through stoking the fires of exactly the opposite, in prime time.

We need our tables turned over, so we can reconsider who we are.

Jesus can't escape the plight of human need, the confrontation with the powers of evil, or the call to preach the Kingdom of God.

It's in his mission plan. It's what he's here for.

His vision statement is, 'The Kingdom of God has come near.'

Once there was a whisper of a new and powerful healer and preacher going round, the news spread like wildfire.

All the crowds come out. Human need comes looking for him.

In Mark chapter 1 we get this sense of great urgency and movement as Jesus unleashes the power of God into the world.

The story paces along as if it has somewhere to go, and quickly.

In a brief chapter Jesus casts out demons, heals, preaches, travels, is baptised, tempted, commissioned, and calls his first disciples.

He even goes off to pray, one of only three times in Mark's gospel where he finds himself completely alone, at least for a while.

Even Jesus, as human as the rest of us, needed time away and rest.

Then his own prayer time is inconvenienced by the impatient disciples.

'C'mon Jesus, let's go, everyone is looking for you.' Jesus' ministry of inconvenience was joyfully received by those who suffered at the hands of the powers of darkness, whether it was physical, spiritual, societal, ethnic or other oppressions.

Those who were suffering were out looking for him.

He was inconvenient to those with power in the world, those with none, the poor, the oppressed, the suffering flocked to him.

Eventually, he became such an inconvenience to the worldly order that the powers sought to put him down for good.

Little did they know, death itself was about to be terribly inconvenienced.

It's something of an indictment on the church that the community of faith which was called from the beginning to take on the ministry of holy inconvenience Jesus began has become so main stream.

It seems that's how much of the wider Australian community view us it seems.

It probably stems in large part from 1500 years of Christendom when the line between the church and the state became dangerously blurred, dangerous for the church as much as anything.

There's no greater temptation, nor potential corruption for the church than by embracing worldly power.

While Christendom has broken down now, the church no longer rules in that way, still sometimes there's a lingering suspicion in the church that worldly politics is where the real power resides.

That if you really want to change things, that's the place to be.

We start to believe that gathering together under God's Word week by week to pray, to sing, to serve, and exercising our faith through nurturing a wise and loving way of being in Christ, is actually pretty insignificant in the rough and tumble of the real world.

What difference do we really make?

Canberra, Macquarie Street, that's where power truly lies.

So we better be looking in that direction, not to an empty cross, and a risen crucified Lord who reigns not over the next election cycle, but over the whole cosmos.

The church can become just another political actor down this path.

It's a subtle, yet fatal slip for everything it is meant to be. In the end it's a form of idolatry.

The church is supposed to embrace Jesus' inconvenient way in worship and witness.

To carry on his ministry.

To serve its risen Lord which as it happens actually leads it into political engagement anyway.

Trouble is it's made up of human beings who are just as fallen as those early disciples were.

Folk like us.

We shy away from the inconvenience of just being with each other in the church, our own brothers and sisters in Christ with whom we are eternally bound, let alone the suffering and struggling population beyond our walls...

... let alone to allow the ways of worship and love for one another to spill over into a public witness that brings a different kind of politics to the world.

We struggle to love one another in grace and peace, let alone the stranger in our midst.

I was watching a panel discussion the other day between 5 internationally acclaimed biblical scholars.

Experts in the Bible.

At one point the disagreement over a particular point became so fierce the moderator stepped in and reminded them that if the Gospel calls us to anything it's out of quarrelling and arguing and into loving kindness.

Being the church is inconvenient if we're being faithful.

Turning to the Lord at his call may be the last thing we really want to do.

It may lead onto all kinds of inconveniences.

Taking time to be with each other, in prayer in fellowship, even with those you may struggle to like or understand.

Being willing to be patient when we want to move on.

Searching for forgiveness and reconciliation when it's far easier to maintain the grudge.

Putting ourselves on the line publically with our friends and family, even within the wider public square of society.

Seeing that it's better to be kind than to be right.

Sacrificing for the sake of others.

Making an offering of our money as well as our time which costs us.

It's all inconvenience right the way through.

We are fortunate not to experience persecution for our faith in Australia, but that very safety can be dangerous, it can lead to a kind of complacency, rather than the urgent inconvenient faith portrayed in Mark's Gospel, in service of the Lord.

None of this means we have to say yes to every request or shouldn't have times where we steal away for some quiet solitude, we need those things as Jesus did.

But it does mean we need to take the long trip down Bowral street (okay Moss Vale Road or the Old Hume Highway) to think, to reflect on who we are and to what we've been called, and praying for a holy strength to take the inconvenient turn of faithfulness.

When the disciples catch up with Jesus and ask him to come, he doesn't say, I'm sorry it's not convenient right now.

The need of the world is a holy call to respond.

It has its own voice.

It sounds a note of heartache in our ears.

And so it must be for us.

Learning to live an inconvenient faith amid all our rationalisations and frustrations and fears and self preferences is how we hold fast to the way of Jesus and his cross.

It's love in action.

Some of those cries come from our own hearts and lives.

And Jesus hears them and comes alongside us and says, 'I am with you brother, I am with you sister.'

You are beloved of God, and nothing will ever change that glorious truth, but there is much to be done.

The Kingdom of God has come near!

So drop your nets, change your way, repent, take up your cross, and follow me.

And I will give you life.

Amen.