

Mark 1: 29-39

Pymble and PLC 4.2.18

***Facebook and the Kingdom of God***

We are right at the beginning of Mark's gospel and last week at Pymble church we heard that Jesus' ministry began with a confrontation with an evil spirit.

We often get a bit worried with talk of evil spirits in the Bible or otherwise we ignore them completely because we think them irrelevant but I made the point that Jesus' confrontation with evil spirits or demons is important in Mark's gospel and may represent Jesus' confrontation with all that would control us or that would take away our joy in life. Mark reveals that Jesus has the authority over those powerful, controlling forces.

In today's reading there are 3 short stories, and I'm only going to refer to them briefly:

We have Jesus healing the mother-in-law of his disciple Peter.

Jesus hears that she has a fever, which in those days could have led to her death, and Jesus, without being asked, goes to her, takes her by the hand and raises her up.

Then we have a short summarising story of the whole city gathering at the door, and Jesus healing many who were sick and, again, many who were effected by evil spirits.

Lastly we have the story of Jesus getting up early, spending time in prayer and then refusing to go back to the city – where no doubt more people were wanting to be healed – and instead presses onto other towns in order to share the message with them also.

And this is just the first 24 hours of Jesus public ministry.

There's lots more to come but already we are seeing that Jesus in word and action,

is confronting and defeating the powers that would take away our joy, and he is spreading his message of good news.

It is in this way that Jesus is bringing the Kingdom of God to the world – the Kingdom of God - that place, or that community, that realm where God reigns and things happen God's way.

OK, park all that thinking to the side for the moment. We'll come back to it.

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Completely different topic now...

Who is on Facebook?

This week, through Facebook, I connected with a friend from primary school

who I haven't seen for about 40 years!

What a great thing this social media is –

I doubt that without it I would ever have talked with this guy again but we hope to meet up when he comes down from Queensland where he now lives.

Facebook can be a great tool.

I mention that because now I'm going to use Facebook and social media, as examples of things that are not so good and I'm going to do it this way.

- Facebook 2012 publicly listed company; pretend you are on the Facebook board – know what this means?
- what's your main job as the board? Grow your profits, make money
- How will you do this? Advertising
- How will you increase this exposure of advertisements?
  - more people; 1 => 2 Billion in 5 years between 2012-2017
  - get them to stay longer, more engaged in content
- How will you get people to stay longer? Give them more of what they like... or maybe what makes them angry or enraged
- How will you know? Profiling  
Profiling is the process of FB knowing what you like, so they can give you more of it.  
Every time you like a post, share a story, or read something, FB is generating a clearer understanding of who you are and what you will respond to, whether it's cat videos, stories about refugees or how dreadful that politician is...  
Using complex mathematical formulas known as algorithms, FB builds this picture and then gives you more of what you like.  
Why? To keep you on longer.  
Because of profiling, FB even promotes to advertisers that they can now identify when users as young as 14 are most susceptible or most likely to respond to a piece of advertising. They'll know when you are probably feeling a bit down and so you might find a chocolate being advertised at that time – or whatever it is.

Especially in the area of politics and attitudes to social issues,

FB will give you more of what you like –

regardless of the truth of the stories.

In the US, in the lead up to the last election,

if you hated Hilary Clinton, you could find a zillion untrue stories that painted her in a worse and worse light; and same for Trump.

But the point is that if you respond to one of them,

you would get more and more of those stories

that just reinforce what you already think.

And you would get none of the stories to balance it up,

or stories that presented a different view.

And the result is that we have an increasingly polarized population where people believe radically different things and they can't even agree on the most basic matters. We can't blame FB and social media for all the problems of the world but researchers are beginning to identify some of these connections.

**Now my point here** is this:

that one of the hopes of those who formed the internet and FB was that it would promote education and bring people together, but somehow strangely it has at least had some of the opposite effect, it has contributed to the division within society while still doing some good like bringing my friend Phil and I together after 40 years.

Now I've just used FB as an example, because I listened to a good podcast this week about it, <sup>1</sup> but why is it that so many things that promise so much good, end up often doing us considerable harm, not just for individuals but also for our society? It just seems to be ingrained in how we do things. Through choices we make, through unacknowledged biases, because we hanker after money and profits somehow our system works against us. It just seems to be the human story.

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And I think part of what the gospel-writer Mark is telling us about Jesus is that Jesus tells a different story; a different kingdom he creates a different story of what life can be like; of how it should be;

- where mothers-in-law are made well, made whole;
- where people are freed from those things that rob them of their joy
- where good news is not kept by one group but shared around to all
- where boundaries about who is in and who is out are challenged and smashed down
- where those considered social outcasts are invited in;
- where bullies are put in their place – even religious ones
- and where religious laws are re-interpreted to be favourable for people, and not as a means of controlling them.

Jesus tells a new story, an alternate story to the one that just keeps our world going in the same disappointing way.

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<sup>1</sup> Facebook and the last days of reality, ABC Conversations with Richard Fidler, Interview with Mark Pesce <http://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/conversations/conversations-mark-pesce/9354558>

Jesus provides an alternative to the system where the love of money and profits has so many dreadful unintended outcomes.

That's why we're invited to follow Jesus: there's a choice to be made.

And if we don't make that choice we may inadvertently end up serving the other system where, despite our best efforts and good intentions, many people get treated poorly, and division grows in our society, and the rich get richer while the poor get poorer, and our community fractures in many ways.

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I hope you have followed my crazy logic this morning: the 3 little stories that we read from Mark's gospel are like a microcosm of what Jesus is all about in this new kingdom – wholeness, freedom and inclusiveness and I have tried to set this against the world in which we live – giving the disappointment of FB as just one example.

May God give us courage to choose the way of Jesus and so seek to make a positive difference in our world.