

# Teach Us to Serve

*A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 8 February 2015, by the Revd Dr Daniel Dries, Rector of Christ Church St Laurence. The readings were Isaiah 40:21-31, 1 Corinthians 9:16-23 and St Mark 1:29-39.*

---

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight: O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.*

From the First Chapter of the Gospel according to St Mark we read:

*He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her and she began to serve them.*

We are still in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel, and this is already Christ's second miracle – the healing of Simon Peter's Mother in Law. There are some who would say that, for a man to be so concerned about his Mother in Law is, in itself, a sort of miracle. However, the most significant aspect of this encounter is the response that is made to the healing, as well as the energy and the frenzied activity that surrounds it.

Most of the Sunday Gospels during this current liturgical year are taken from the Gospel According to Mark. Mark's Gospel is the earliest and the shortest of the four Gospels. A little while ago, I encouraged my own parishioners to set aside a couple of hours and to read Mark's Gospel from beginning to end – something that can easily be done in one sitting. When read in its entirety, we discover that Mark has no time for small talk; there is very little theological reflection of the kind that we find in John's Gospel. Instead, Mark takes the reader from one dramatic event to another with a sense of urgency or breathlessness. Today's Gospel reading is no exception. It is full of action and drama. A woman is ill, probably at the point of death. Christ bursts onto the scene; she is healed, but the action and the drama continues.



Earlier this week, the al-Jazeera Journalist, Peter Greste awoke to yet another day of imprisonment in an Egyptian gaol. After 400 days behind bars, Peter Greste tells how he had often fantasised about his release. A little like the dramatic scene of today's Gospel Reading, a guard suddenly approached Peter Greste and informed him that he was about to be set free. Shaking his head in disbelief, the journalist came to terms with this surprising, but startling revelation.

However, as soon as he was released, Peter Greste’s concern turned to his colleagues – vowing to continue to fight for their release. And so, the drama and the urgency of this situation also continues.



When Simon’s Mother in Law is healed, her concern immediately shifts from her own well-being, to caring for those around her. We are told that as soon as she was lifted up and healed, she began to serve them. This is the first moment in the Gospel when another person cares-for or ministers to Christ. When we read “She began to serve them”, we might have a sense that she went to the kitchen and made everyone a cup of tea. However, the implications go far beyond this. The verb used in the Greek is ‘*diakoneó*’, from which we derive the word ‘deacon’. In the protestant tradition, the term deacon is often similar in meaning to an elder. A deacon is a person who is discerned or set apart for leadership within the church – usually with a particular responsibility for pastoral care. In the Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions, a deacon is the first order of ordained ministry, before priest and bishop. In my tradition, a deacon wears the stole diagonally (like a sash) across the body. It is a slightly odd look – a little like a contestant in a beauty pageant. However, as the deacon’s stole hangs at the side of their waist, it reminds us of a towel or an apron worn by those who waited at table; those whose job it was to serve others.

And so, when Simon’s Mother in Law was healed, we might say that she became the first deacon. She humbled herself and served; immediately following her release from suffering, she cared for Christ and his disciples. Despite what *Downton Abbey* would have us believe, being a servant is not exactly the most sought after job in our society. However, in the midst of the action and drama of Mark’s Gospel, the message is made clear that servant-hood is an unavoidable requirement of Christian discipleship. As St Paul said in the First Letter to the Corinthians, “For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all...”



I imagine that most of you were already aware of Peter Greste’s dramatic release from gaol before I mentioned it earlier. However, I suspect that many of you would not have heard the news of David Catalano, and his equally strange return to prison late last week. David Catalano is a 31 year old man who turned himself in at a police station on the Island of Cyprus, pleading to be sent back to gaol. Mr Catalano, a convicted criminal, was given permission to serve out the remainder of his prison sentence living in a Sicilian monastery with Franciscan Monks. After six weeks of living at the monastery, Mr Catalano escaped and begged to be sent back to gaol, arguing that life in the monastery was just too challenging.

It is possible that these Italian monks were just really dreadful at chanting the psalms or cooking pasta, however, this story highlights that as soon as we become disciples, we embrace a very demanding way of life. We relinquish something of the freedom of this world as we commit ourselves to a life of 'diakoneó' – a life of mutual love and service.

In his typically rushed manner, Mark tells us that Simon's Mother in Law was healed and that she began to serve them. Being Mark, he doesn't linger in the detail, he doesn't tell us what she did; he doesn't indicate how well she did it; he simply tells us that she understood the requirements of discipleship; she cared for those around her as she was able.



Sr Helen Prejean is a 75 year old American Roman Catholic nun. A very direct and courageous woman, who speaks with a broad Louisiana accent, Helen Prejean became famous largely an account of her book *Dead Man Walking*. The book *Dead Man Walking* was used as the basis for a play, an opera, and a 1995 motion picture, for which the actress Susan Sarandon won an Academy Award. *Dead Man Walking* is Sr Helen Prejean's own account of her confronting relationship with Matthew Poncelet, a prisoner on death row in the State of Louisiana. Helen Prejean volunteered to become Matthew Poncelet's spiritual advisor as he prepared for death by electrocution. As well as continuing to serve as a spiritual advisor to prisoners on death row, Sr Helen Prejean has become a passionate campaigner for the abolishment of the death penalty; something that she attributes to having first witnessed an execution in person.

She writes:

*"I saw the suffering and I let myself feel it... I saw the injustice and was compelled to do something about it. I changed from being a nun who only prayed for the suffering world to a woman with my sleeves rolled up, living my prayer.*

Sr Helen Prejean has not achieved her goal of abolishing the death penalty in America. There were 35 executions last year; there have already been 7 this year. Some would suggest that her life and ministry has been a waste. Helen Prejean has been given all sorts of awards, but she has not achieved her primary goal. She has spent much of her life serving or caring for the spiritual needs of people who were destined to die anyway. Some would see this as completely futile. However, they would be people who fail to understand the meaning of 'diakoneó' – the belief that, as Christians, we are absolutely bound to serve others; to meet their spiritual and their physical needs, albeit in our humble and often limited capacity.



*He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her and she began to serve them.*

From the moment that we allow Christ to heal us, or to raise us up; we are committed to a life of service. We too are called to roll up our sleeves, and to do whatever we can to alleviate the pain and suffering that we see around us. A life of '*diakoneó*' usually will not bring fame and fortune. In the general sense of the word, '*diakoneó*' will not guarantee success. As we live lives of humble service, we must remember that, as disciples of Christ, we are only called to serve others – we are not called to save the world. Christ himself did this once and for all two thousand years ago.

I conclude with a prayer of St Ignatius of Loyola. Please join with me in prayer.

*Teach us, good Lord, to serve you as you deserve;  
to give and not to count the cost,  
to fight and not to heed the wound,  
to toil and not to seek for rest,  
to labour and not to ask for any reward,  
save that of knowing that we do your will. Amen.*