



Proper 5, Year B – February 5, 2012

Mark 1.29-39

**A Homily preached by the Venerable M. Ansley Tucker**

Simon Peter has stubbed his toe three times on various rocks and twigs in this wretched wilderness: if he'd had half a brain, he'd have brought a lantern with him! Is Jesus *nuts*, coming out here in the middle of night like this? But no matter: there he is over there. Finally. Simon pauses only a moment before he bursts on the scene, shattering the stillness of the dawn, thundering like an untrained puppy into the exquisite focus of an act of prayer. In that fleeting instant a question takes momentary shape in his mind: Why does he do this? I must ask him one day how to pray. And in the very next moment, Master! There you are! Great news! There's a whole crowd assembled outside Abe's right this minute, and they're asking for you. Come on, hurry up! They've brought sick and lame, even a few lepers. The whole town has heard about last night. Come on, come on! this is a terrific opportunity!

And Jesus rubs his eyes, as those who have been deep in prayer are wont to do when they reorient themselves to the "horizontal" of life, and he says, No. No, I am not going to do that. In fact, not only am I not going back to town with you; I'm not going to be labeled as someone whose primary ministry is healing. So, Simon, *you* go back to town. Get the others, and tell them to pack a bag. Tell them that we are going on to the neighbouring towns on a *preaching* mission.

It is a fascinating interchange, even *unembellished* by a preacher's imagination! And it sets before us two wise and stringent cautions.

When I was an adolescent, I longed — as most teenagers do — to be pretty, to be shorter, to be athletic, to have clothes like my friend Kathy's. All of which were pretty much constitutionally out of the question. I'm not sure my parents managed to console me to any satisfactory degree, but they did set before me alternative longings which became for me — and dare I suggest, countless others — an untested, but presumably self-evident theory about what is *really* important in life. From my mother, the Cotton Bowl Queen, this: Don't worry about things you can do nothing about, dear; what really matters is to be popular. And from my father, the Admiral: find something you're good at, and succeed.

Perhaps the baldness of these two statements, plucked as they are from any context or qualification, reveals them to be the simplistically misguided principles they are. But I submit that together they constitute two pieces of the "wisdom of this age", and that they exercise a far greater power over our choices and sense of self-worth than we are generally alert enough to admit.

Now, you may ask, how did we get from Jesus' wilderness' quiet time to the bottled advice of the Archdeacon's parents (and perhaps, yours)? It isn't so long a leap, really. For it seems to me that what Jesus rejects in Simon's eager invitation to come and do some more of his healing tricks (which, I suggest, is how the people saw them), are precisely the twin sirens of popularity and competence.

What Simon offers Jesus is the adulation of the crowd. All he has to do is open his mouth, do one more miracle, and they will love him. See what a success the Master is! But Jesus doesn't fall for it. Jesus isn't about to make the approval of others the barometer of his success. Sometimes, doing the right thing entails frustrating the designs of others, and making people darned mad. Jesus quite simply refuses to pander to misplaced expectations. He will not be seduced by praise or

fawning, no matter how good it feels, no matter, even, how big an audience it guarantees him. It is a salutary story, because popularity, unlike good looks, changed height, athletic prowess, or Kathy Loucks' clothes, *can* be gone after, and achieved.

But more than this, is the almost imperceptible reorientation of Jesus' ministry. The reason the crowds are up before dawn waiting for him is that only last evening (as Mark has it) "all who were sick" had gathered at the door of Simon and Andrew and, it seems, Jesus had only got around to healing "many of them." The villagers are quite simply back for more. They recognise in Jesus an extraordinary gift for healing, and by cracky, he'd better get over here to Abe's place, and exercise it. That is, find something you're good at, and succeed.

But for Jesus, it isn't that simple. No matter how gifted a healer he is, no matter how much work there is for him to do in Capernaum (I mean, imagine! *easy* work, and lots of it), Jesus also feels a strong calling to a ministry of *proclamation*. To be sure, as Jesus begins his tour of Galilee, he does not desist from a ministry of healing. But he is truly wary of allowing it to assume disproportionate importance in his total ministry, and he actively discourages people from casting him in the role of temple-magician. For you see, sometimes the thing we find easiest, the thing we are best at, is little more than the path of least resistance (for Jesus a quick way to win people's attention and hearts — popularity!). The truth is, just because we are good at something is no proof that it is our primary vocation. It may be that God is calling us to a much more difficult, even darker path, a path which will challenge our easy assumptions, and call us past our natural abilities.

A path, perhaps, where we shall stub our toes, and need a light. A path others may think us *nuts* to have chosen. A path whose ways are made known to us in the stillness of the dawn, and whose wisdom is revealed in the exquisite focus of an act of prayer.

Oh, and by the way, how *does* he pray like that, anyway?