

Clambering, Controlling and Called

Mark 3:7-19

Introduction

What brought you to church? No, I don't mean your car or your own legs, I mean, what was the prompt for you to start coming to church? For a number of people here, we grew up coming to church and we've never left. However, for others here there will have been a reason to come to church in the first place or to return to church after being absent for some time.

Last week I was wearing a green and black batik shirt and Elfie Beggs mentioned to her daughter, Kelli, that the green of my shirt was colour of the felt which she had been looking for. I noted to Kellie that it was clear that her mother had a 'felt' need. Felt needs are a common reason why someone will start to come to church. No, not the felt need I was joking about last week, but the the felt need for friendship, support, encouragement, healing, forgiveness, purpose, etc.

This morning we're going to consider how many people came to Jesus because of a felt need and Jesus cared for them, addressing their needs, but he also called people to a life beyond this initial interaction with him.

Before we begin to look at the crowds coming to Jesus, it's helpful to put this section into context, particularly as we've had a few weeks break from Mark's Gospel. We may remember that starting in chapter 2 we saw Jesus engaged in a number of controversies with teachers of the Law and Pharisees. These controversies come to a head at the start of chapter 3 where people were seeking to abuse and manipulate God's law concerning the Sabbath for the purpose of finding a reason to accuse Jesus by seeing if Jesus would heal on the Sabbath.

In verse six we see a separation take place. Jesus had argued that saving life was permitted on the Sabbath and so had healed the man with a crippled hand but the Pharisees then went out to plan to kill Jesus.

The Clambering Crowd (Mark 3:7-10)

And so we come to this new section. The Pharisees have gone off and Jesus withdraws with his disciples. It's interesting that while the Pharisees refuse to receive Jesus as having authority, the crowds had no such hesitation. News about Jesus had spread through cities, towns and villages, and "many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon." The crowd gives its verdict as to whether Jesus has the power and authority to heal them and meet their needs by rushing to him in such numbers that Jesus had to arrange for a boat to be ready so that he wouldn't be crushed.

It's worth noting that the crowd is presented fairly neutrally in this text. Yes, there is a fear that they may crush Jesus because of their large numbers and their desire to get close to Jesus but that desire is not presented negatively. What is it that brought these people to Jesus with such enthusiasm? The crowds came to him because they "heard all he was doing" and we're told that Jesus "had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him."

The crowd came to Jesus because of legitimate felt needs. People had come to Jesus because of illness, disease and injury but presumably also because they had been told that here was a man who proclaimed the kingdom of God and was living out its values. It probably didn't hurt that by this time Jesus was getting a reputation for receiving those people who were rejected by the religious establishment and for showing up the teachers of the law and the Pharisees (those who believed that they always had the right answers and were closer to Yahweh than others).

When we think about our situation here in the Lockyer Valley, what are the felt needs of people around us? Think about your neighbours, family members, friends, work colleagues, etc. As we think about this we should also be mindful of what are the gifts and skills with which the Lord has blessed us that we can use to address some of these felt needs.

Just over a year ago the British Government appointed a Minister for Loneliness. Loneliness is one of the more painful and prevalent problems our modern communities are facing. Having spoken to people at Laidley and Hatton Vale it is apparent that this is a concern here in the Lockyer Valley too. I would suggest that despite our craft groups having a reputation for good works of art and a high standard of sewing, stitching and other skills which I know nothing about, one of the reasons for their success has been in meeting a need that people have for community.

As a man, I'm grateful for the men's morning tea at Forest Hill but I wonder if that is a group which predominantly focuses upon the men already in our churches. Do we have a space where men feel free to invite non-Christian men to a gathering?

I know that there has been talk about the needs of children and youth in our communities. I'm sure I'm not alone in praying about the children and youth in our communities and in thinking about ways in which their needs can be met.

The Controlling Demons (Mark 3:11-12)

As we think about what are the felt needs in the community, we should not shy away from clearly pointing people to Jesus and the kingdom of God. This isn't some 'bait and switch' idea where we offer one thing, like friendship, only to then become Bible bashers. We need to offer an integrated message where people are welcomed into our community but we also unapologetically share how our community exists and that is because Christ is at the centre of it.

Some people fear that being clear and up-front about Jesus and our commitment to him may be a turn-off for people coming to church or one of our gatherings but we've just read how the crowds came to Jesus and Jesus clearly proclaimed the message of the Kingdom of God and didn't back away from telling people to get right with God. Let's not forget the first words of Jesus recorded in Mark's Gospel, found in verse 15 of chapter 1, "'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'"

When we talk about felt needs we often focus on needs for friendship, health, food, etc. but when people know that they are in need of forgiveness and for a right relationship with God, they are also felt needs. We must never forget that this is the greatest need which people have and it is the calling which Jesus gives to his church.

A failure of the church to address these greatest needs, or for people to be willing to humble themselves before Jesus to have their deepest needs met, brings us to the second group to be mentioned in this section. While the crowd is predominantly dealt referred to in a neutral way, the second group is clearly presented more negatively. In verses 11 and 12 we read, “Whenever the impure spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, ‘You are the Son of God.’ But he gave them strict orders not to tell others about him.”

Why is it that Jesus forbade the impure spirits to say who he was? There are two main perspectives on this. First, Jesus wanted people to make up their own minds about him from the knowledge that he was giving them. This was connected to how Jesus was different to the kind of Messiah the people were expecting and so he wanted people to hear from him the values and characteristics of God’s Kingdom which he was bringing, before they labeled him the Son of God or Messiah.

The second perspective as to why Jesus didn’t allow the demons to say who he was is because of the belief that knowing the name of something means that you can control that being. This belief is still held in many cultures around the world. Many witch doctors seek to know the precise name of a spirit which is causing a problem because then they can give commands to the spirit, they can control it.

It seems probable that the demons sought to control Jesus by using his proper title or name, “You are the Son of God,” (3:11) or “Jesus of Nazareth [...] the Holy One of God.” (1:24) And how can Jesus clearly show that they don’t have control of him? By telling them to shut up! By silencing the impure spirits Jesus is showing this they can’t give him commands but, in contrast, the impure spirits are compelled to obey Jesus’ commands.

What does this have to do with us? What is the connection between the impure spirits seeking to control Jesus and us thinking about meeting the needs of our community? To put it simply and bluntly, there are many people around, both inside the church and outside, who would like to have a little 'Genie Jesus' in their pocket which they can pull out when they want to to make themselves feel better. People like this want to have the community without the commitment to Christ, or the friendship with others without the faithfulness to God's word, such thinking will emphasise happiness over holiness, or the feeling of being loved without loving God.

When we fail to clearly share the message of Jesus and describe how our hope is firmly rooted in him and when we fail to show our love for Jesus by seeking to be obedient to his teaching, then we are pandering to a controlling spirit which is not truly submitted to Jesus.

Earlier, I asked what may be some of the felt needs of people in the Lockyer Valley and ways in which the church may meet some of those needs. As you reflect on that, think about how we can point to Christ as we meet those felt needs and show how Jesus addresses our deepest needs and longings.

The Called Disciples (Mark 3:13-19)

Finally, we come to Jesus calling the twelve in verses 13 to 19. A question which needs to be asked when we read about Jesus calling the twelve, or the apostles, is whether the call that those men received is to be characteristic of all followers of Jesus or whether it was unique to those specific people. Sometimes the instructions which Jesus gives to the Apostles in the Gospel accounts is quite specific to them, however, in Mark's Gospel the twelve are presented as the true disciples of Jesus (despite it being acknowledged that one would betray Jesus) and so what characterises them is to be characteristic of all true followers of Jesus.

We don't know the full story of the disciples but we have enough information, such as the hot-tempered nature of the 'sons of thunder', to know that the disciples certainly came with their faults. Jesus wasn't calling twelve perfect men to him. This is

good news for us because you and I are also not perfect and yet Jesus calls to each of us as well.

So what was the nature of this call? What was Jesus calling the twelve to do? We read, “Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons.”

In Mark’s Gospel, the driving out of demons and healing people are intimately tied together. Jesus is sending people out to address the acute and serious felt needs which people had. We may or may not have the specific gift of healing or exorcising demons but, as we’ve already talked about this morning, we can all be used to address the needs in the people around us. We also see that Jesus sent out the twelve to preach. We’re not told what the twelve were to preach but it was presumably the message Jesus proclaimed, the message of what the Kingdom of God was like and how the kingdom was coming in Jesus. This ties in with what we were talking about earlier of the need for the activities of our church to always be pointing people to Jesus and the sharing of God’s word.

But there is one more purpose for which Jesus called his disciple and it’s listed first because it’s most important. “Jesus appointed twelve that they might be with him.” Today we’ve been considering addressing the felt needs in our community, but for us to be able to do that, we need to make sure that we are with Jesus. If we are not with Jesus then we will be presenting something other than Jesus to those around us and indeed we will look to others to meet our needs rather than having our needs met by Jesus. The first calling for those of us who follow Jesus and wear the title ‘Christian’ is to make sure that we are staying close to Jesus and getting to know him more and more.

Conclusion

So what have we considered today? We started by recognising that people came to Jesus because of a felt need and this is very understandable. In turn we’ve

been challenged to think about what are the felt needs of our neighbours and the people around us and whether the church has a role in addressing those needs. In particular, the church can make a positive impact as our society's struggles with loneliness and isolation.

However, as we seek to address the felt needs in our community, we need to make sure that we are continuing to point people to Jesus - who he is and what he's done for us. A failure to point accurately to Jesus often indicates that we'd like our needs met on our terms and may well mean that we'd like a little 'Genie Jesus' who is safe and who we can control. Just as Jesus wouldn't allow the impure spirits to try and control him, so he won't allow us or others to control him. We need to come to Jesus on his terms and surrender ourselves to him.

Finally, the best solution to thinking that we can control Jesus is to be with him. This is the first and highest calling of a disciple. As we get to know Jesus more and more we will know more of his love for us and understand more deeply how he is worthy of being followed and called Lord.

Let's make sure we continue this conversation. What do you need to help you grow closer to Jesus? We're about to restart our Bible study groups but you may know that you would grow more through reading the Bible one-on-one with a friend. It may be that you want to spend more time talking and listening to God in prayer times (I personally want to increase my prayers this year). And the list can go on.

Also, keep thinking and discussing with each other and the church council what are the needs in our community and how can we as a church seek to address them and do it in a way that points people very clearly to Jesus and how he's formed us.

Let us pray that the Lord would bring this to pass for his glory.

[Pray to close]