

Power to the weak
Isa 40:21-31, Mark 1:29-39

The human situation really doesn't change much does it? The world has always been full of the weak and the powerful. The powerful get what they want at great cost to those who don't have power.

There are many people in our society today who don't have much power. Who are they? Perhaps you think of Maori especially this Waitangi weekend, or beneficiaries or gay people. Whoever you think of; it's good to remember that many of us come from a position of privilege and power and we don't even notice that we do.

The Bible cuts to the heart of what God is about. God is about bringing power to the weak and strength to the powerless. The books in the Bible were written by Jewish people; people who were weak; a minority; people who were oppressed by various military superpowers over the centuries.

They'd been on the receiving end of an untold amount of suffering and hardship as a result. Rob Bell notes that "they write with a particular vehemence towards those who abuse their power and take advantage of people weaker than they are."¹

They write with great pains to point out that God has a bias towards those who are powerless. God's heart is for those who don't live in the fullness of life for whatever reason.

Let's check it out in Isaiah.

First a tiny bit of background: the book was probably written in the eighth century B.C. During Isaiah's time, the Assyrian army ruled many peoples with a harshness and terror never seen before in history.

Israel is two nations: North and South, Israel and Judah. They'd warred against each other and those around them for a few hundred years. Neither kingdom will stand through the storms to come.

The Assyrians are rising in power, and the Babylonians will overthrow them in time. The North will fall soon. The South will fall later. God raises up the prophet Isaiah to tell the people this message.

The Assyrians rise against the North. The Babylonians rise against the Assyrians. The Southern Kingdom will go into exile in Babylon.

But Isaiah's message doesn't end there.

In our reading from this book, the writer sets God's concern for the weak, in the midst of a picture of God's majesty. There is no one like him! In those days it was not unusual to sing about the power of your god. All the gods of the nations were powerful; at least all their people said they were. The amazing difference between the Hebrew God and the other gods is that Yahweh actually did give a damn.

God doesn't just have a heart for the weak; he has the power to do something about setting them free. Weak and powerless Israel will come back home.

¹ The Bible, Rob Bell. 212

That's Isaiah's message. God's judgment is coming, but so is His comfort and restoration for the weak and the powerless.

But wait there's more! A mysterious Servant will bear the sins of many, reconciling Israel and the world to the Lord.

What will this mysterious Servant look like?

Funnily enough he will look a lot like Jesus.

Jesus comes bringing forgiveness and healing. And he brings it to those not generally regarded as the important ones. He doesn't focus on the powerful in society, except to berate them for their abuse of power. Instead he focuses on those society overlooks.

In our story he heals Peter's mother in law. Women were not generally very powerful in Jesus' day. They quietly stayed in the background serving the tea.

Mark places this episode early on in Jesus' ministry. Matthew places the story immediately after Jesus heals a Roman officer's servant – scandalous! The Romans were the Assyrians of Jesus' day. They were the Jews' enemies. Still, Jesus commends the Roman's faith and heals his servant.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all agree that Jesus healed many people. Some of the people they describe can be difficult for us to identify with today. We don't commonly see many people who need demons casting out. In Jesus' day very little was known about mental ill health. It's possible some of those described as having demons struggled with mental illness. Whatever their circumstances though,

they were rendered weak and powerless because of them and so Jesus healed them.

Jesus restored them to wholeness and enabled them to take their place in society as fully-functioning members of society. Peter's mother in law could resume her place in the family – caring for others the way she always had.

The story says the whole town watched the healings. That may be a little bit of hyperbole but Jesus did attract a lot of interest. Wouldn't it be awesome if the whole town came to our door to see Jesus at work?

Certainly the whole town benefitted as the weak became strong again. When an individual is restored, the whole community benefits. Peter's home town of Capernaum was a better place because of Jesus' care for the weak.

After that intensity of healing ministry, Jesus is knackered. He spends time with his Dad, restoring his own energy levels. Everyone wants a piece of him. But Jesus must go on to other towns and to other people who need his restorative power. He's on a mission that heads towards Jerusalem.

A few weeks ago I was having a robust discussion with someone. They said something like "We need God to break through in power and miracles." I asked that person what that would look like for them. Their response was miracles of healing – physical and spiritual; supernatural things that show God is at work."

I get where they were coming from. And yet I have to ask why is it that we Christians in the modern West want those kind of miracles? For people in other countries the kinds of miracles

they would appreciate would be enough food to eat or a roof over their head. Or maybe even for the bombs to stop for a while or for them to go freely across a border to and from work. That kind of miracle would make a huge difference to their daily lives.

Recently at church I saw power being given to someone we might call powerless (though of course they aren't really powerless). Well the potential was there for a miracle. A homeless man came to church. He needed food and a job. Someone took him to the supermarket and bought food. Someone arranged a paid job for him and even a safe place for the guy to pitch his tent.

When it came down to it, the guy didn't show up for work or take up the offer of a tent site. However to me it was a miracle of love he could have had all that if he chose to take it. I saw God in action through our church family and I was humbled and very proud at the same time.

We don't live in Capernaum. We live in (insert the name of your town). What would our town look like if the weak and powerless received healing and restoration from Jesus?