

Reflection: Like an angel

The writer of Mark's gospel, who probably had much of his insights from Peter the Apostle, gets right into the Good News in chapter One !!

The baptism of Jesus, the healing of the disabled chap in the synagogue,
And a healing in Peter & Andrew's home – a healing of a 'penthera' – a mother-in-law -

Then lots of people clamouring for healing -- Jesus knew they were coming because they wanted miracles,,

There were obviously many questions forming for Jesus, too --- he could see so much suffering, yet he knew he needed to bring the message of God's prodigious, over-flowing love to other towns

It's clear that Jesus could have had a successful career, perhaps opening a mega-healing centre in Capernaum, which the disciples seem to be hinting – stay till all the healing is done – keep your gifts in our community
Instead, Jesus knows he has to keep on the move –

How do we to feel about the restored woman being raised up to serve –
Have you thought about it?

Was Peter's mother-in-law healed "just in time for supper"

The guys were coming home for Sabbath lunch or supper and were offering an explanation to Jesus of why there wouldn't be much tucker, because "Mother is indisposed."
Being unwell, with a fever, and in Luke's gospel named a high fever, was pretty scary in those days – no penicillin for centuries yet

Jesus wasn't in any way fearful of Mother in law's infection, - he went into the private room, and gave her his hand to lift her up – he was risking ritual impurity –at least temporary exclusion from the life and worship of the folk in Capernaum.

Did you women get a bit indignant that this woman isn't' even given a name, (like many in the gospels) at one moment was confined to bed with a high fever, is the next moment apparently waiting on healthy men so they can enjoy their sabbath rest?

Do you wonder whether the blokes heaved a sigh of relief that there would be dinner on the table so they could enjoy stimulating conversation with Jesus while she bustled about with pots and pans?

But Jesus didn't push her down to be a servile drudge. He lifted her up to minister. He transformed her to a full participant in his ministry. The ministry of hospitality is not insignificant, especially when Jesus is the guest of honour. In her case the first thing she probably did was to get a meal for her son-in-law and his guests, or at least to help the other (unmentioned) women with this.

Giving and sharing hospitality is one way to offer hope and healing to others. Jesus' ministry often depended on the care of women like Simon Peter's mother-in-law. The gospels hint at this, but don't give us the details. How tantalising?

Is it that the men who wrote the gospels took traditional women's work for granted?

The woman responds to the humanising, healing touch of Jesus by acting in the way that he acts – generously, passionately caring for her guests having been so singled out, recognised and cared for by Jesus, when Palestinian women were usually v. poor, and often dis-regarded.

So can we say she has been liberated – brought out of her insignificance, to minister to the disciples, and most probably went on to spend her days chatting the Good News of Jesus to all who came visiting her!!

Is it that the men who wrote the gospels took traditional women's work for granted?

The King James Bible reads, "*she ministered unto them*". The Greek word 'diakonia' is the same word Mark uses for the angels who ministered to Jesus in his wilderness temptations. It's also the word used for those who served God by leading the early church in prayer and action.

Somehow infection/or its opposite happens:
Instead of Jesus catching something from her
She catches healing and wholeness.

It's important to note that there were women still following & serving Jesus just prior and after his death — the males often "didn't understand," as the writers say

Scholars today, particularly female scholars, are arguing fervently & hopefully – that 'diakonia' - serving, is an early model of non-exclusive discipleship - male & female followers offering servant leadership
Not as the menial role of a Palestinian housewife

Some see a sense of the ridiculous – that the unnamed woman was healed – just in time for supper!! See the ambiguity – being restored to her 'bondage' in a patriarchal society?

In fact many commentators remark that the word Mark chooses to describe this woman's action is not insignificant. It echoes what the angels did for Jesus in verse 13. Curiously the NRSV uses "waited on" in 1:13 and "serve" in 1:31.

So is Simon's mother-in-law simply the first female disciple?

La Verdierie says: "the first mention in Mark's Gospel of pastoral ministry, that is, ministry to the Church itself, is that after Jesus raises her to life, she ministered to the nucleus of the Church"[3]

Perhaps it is a ministry which is different to that of the apostles!?

The desire to see this as a misunderstood text which is really about the discipleship of women forms part of a “hermeneutics of recovery” which is one dimension of feminist exegesis –

Was there, at the beginning of the ministry, a certain equality prevailing?

Yet it seems that this equality has for the most part been concealed in the writings of the New Testament.”[5]

Maybe its better to live creatively with the apparent ambiguities in the text – acknowledging that in those days women were sometimes no better than slaves, and the Gospels show us that Jesus noticed, spoke, affirmed, cared and empowered women.

What does God’s love free us for - Not what does it free us from

What are we freed to: ---

A story about my mother-in-law Marjory – John and I were serving at Ernabella in 1972 when my anxiety about my baby’s weight developed into post-natal depression and baby and I were air-lifted out.

I went to Marjory’s home, and she ‘ministered’ to me

(John and our little son were packing our goods in Ernabella)

Marjory knew how to look after me and encourage me - she listened, she touched, she hugged, no recriminations –

we later came to understand she, too, had had a period of post-natal depression

Grandma’s caring shows how those who have been in the desert and returned, can minister to others. One of the gifts we can bring, as Christ’s only hands and feet in the world, is we can offer deep listening, deep listening which is resourced from the dilemmas and difficulties we have faced, listening and encouragement that helps each other to feel whole and loved.

The touch of someone who cares about us, who loves us, is like nothing else in the world. It’s like coming into contact with an electrical charge, bringing us and others to wonder about how precious our living is

I’ve raised some of the ambiguities of this text for you –

Robin Mann, the Adelaide songwriter, was asked to compose a song for the 2001 World Diakonia conference in Durham, UK – he says we are all called to serve *like angels*:

Jesus served, Mother in law served, we are called on to serve – Patiently,
Passionately, Joyfully; willingly like an angel!!!

Faye, Katherine, Ken & myself are going to sing Robin’s song: “Like an Angel” (words of song following)

1. She was in bed with a fever
when her son-in-law came with his friends.
She was embarrassed,
but she was too sick to pretend.
She was in bed with a fever
when he brought all his friends to her home.
Jesus took her by the hand
and the fever was gone.

And she served like an angel,
patiently served like an angel;
passionate caring - love is so daring -
just like the angels surrounding the
Lamb night and day.

2. He didn't come as a ruler,
didn't act like a Lord or a King -
helping and healing and foot-washing - that was his thing.
He didn't come as a ruler,
didn't seem like the God they'd expect -
being a lamb, not a wolf, didn't earn their respect.

And he served like an angel,
willingly served like an angel;
passionate caring - love is so daring -
just like the angels surrounding the
Lamb night and day.

3. Are we like baffled disciples?
Do we argue for seats on the throne?
Don't want to follow him,
not down the road that he's on.
Save us from being so foolish.
Jesus, teach us that love is the way,
and that we gain the whole world
when we give it away.

So we serve like an angel,
joyfully serve like an angel;
passionate caring - love is so daring -
just like the angels surrounding the
Lamb - like an angel,
joyfully serve like an angel . . . night and day.