Advance and Retreat

Psalm 102:12-22

Mark 1:29-45

Let us pray: Heavenly Father we admit that it is not only our minds that wander, but also our hearts. We pray that You will work in us by Your word and spirit so that our hearts would be stable and we would be set upon You and the truth of Your word. We pray this is Jesus name, AMEN

Covenant people of God, the Lord Jesus often told people, and not only people, but He also told demons, not to go spreading around His identity or stories of His deeds. Now to some this might seem a little bit strange. Or like a case of even false humility. Because the Lord Himself also did many mighty deeds in full public view. So is this commanding of silence a little bit like shutting the gate after the proverbial horse has bolted. It may seem to us like someone who does a good deed today, for example giving a lot of money to charities as celebrities often do, and then agreeing to an interview on TV in which you say to the cameras that you really prefer that the whole thing didn’t cause so much attention. That in question, however, is a false one. The ministry of the Lord Jesus and His comments about His own ministry, are carefully planned and orchestrated, a carefully planned program of advance and retreat and then advance again, leading on to the proper time for the fulfilment of His ministry – the completion of it and the complete victory that He won on the cross.

We can think of it this way – as a kind of a time bomb. Something that is carefully set with a slow burning fuse – with a fuse lit at precisely the right time in history and the time on that fuse set to burn at just the right speed and timed so that the whole thing explodes at just the right, precise moment in history.

Two points as we see how the Lord Jesus followed God’s plan for this. First of all, fuelling His growing reputation; and secondly, restricting His growing reputation. Fuelling it and restricting it.

In the first place, we need to see the Lord’s publicity campaign as a very definite program, a definite plan, for the revealing of the gospel of the kingdom. We saw that last time. The Lord Jesus was an appointed herald. He was an appointed, a commissioned herald, given this specific task, that He had to go in God’s name and announce these very things. So this was not something that could be kept secret. Moreover we saw last time in Mark 1:15, that this was the fulfilment of time. This was the time that God had appointed for the coming of the Messiah. And the Lord Jesus had a task to bring that very fact to light. He had to display the fact that He was the Messiah who had come at the appointed time – the fullness of time.

Not only so, but even in the Old Testament this was already something that was spoken of, prophesied and demanded that there would be publicity for the name of God. And you find this especially throughout the Psalms, that it is commanded that God’s people spread His fame abroad. This is what we are called to do – to spread the fame, the name, the reputation of our God, and of course the Lord Jesus is God – so that too was part of His calling. To spread the fame of God. We find even in the use of the word “immediate” – Mark especially uses this word “immediate” again and again – we have already come across that too. You find it for example in Chapter 1:10; verse 21, verse 28, verse 29**. Immediately** He did this, this happened and **immediately** He did that. And that creates a very strong impression of an urgency to a very deliberate campaign. Jesus was on a timetable. A timetable set by His Father. Sometimes the scriptures speaks this way, that it was **necessary** that He go and be in a particular place. He had a program to follow. And it was one that demanded deliberate publicity.

Now the first of the miracles that we come across in this text that contribute to this publicity has been described by one writer as ‘an unpretentious miracle’. That is perhaps a rather contradiction in terms, that every miracle is something that draws attention. So none of them are really unpretentious, but when you compare the different miracles that Jesus did, this one is relatively low key. The healing of Simon’s mother-in-law from a fever. Which by the way, shows as many pointed out in writing on this passage - many will comment that this shows the error of the Roman Catholic teaching that the priesthood and the pope, and so on, have to be unmarried. And here we see clear evidence that the apostle Peter, or Simon as he is called at that point, was married. He had a mother-in-law.

At any rate, despite the low key nature of this miracle, either the word of this somehow gets out, and it doesn’t say who the ‘they’ were, who were bringing the people to be healed, but either word of this got out from Simon’s house, or perhaps combined with the fact of the earlier exorcism in the synagogue, and before you know it, you had what is described as ‘the whole city’ not to be taken in the absolute way, but meaning a huge number from all over the city -people gathered outside Simon’s house.

Verse 34 then says, the Lord went out and He healed many of them, those who were ill. And He cast many demons out of those, so this is a lot of work, a lot of miracles going on at this time. This is hardly a case of concealment. The Lord knew what He was doing and no doubt He intended the effect that came from that, knowing that people talk and that here, He was displaying miracles and many of them, in front of a large crowd of people.

Just a side note on demon possession. It’s a subject that intrigues lots of people today as it always has, I note that it is pretty rare in the Old Testament. There are very few accounts of demon possession in the Old Testament. And there are very few mentions of it in the later books of the New Testament. And I would suggest that that kind of possession is relatively rare today as well. But it appears that the coming of the Messiah into the world sparked an unusual outbreak of demon possessions, as Satan pulled out all of the stops in order to try and thwart the coming of the Messiah and the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Also to destroy the fledgling New Testament church. In addition to that fact, and as I mentioned last week, this is something that shows the spiritual darkness of the time. That spiritual darkness that descends, especially on those who have claimed to follow the Lord Jesus, who have been members of His church, who have been exposed to, and know the truth of the Bible well, and then turn away from it.

And this is a warning to all of us here as well. Because we all know these things and we know them well. And if any of us would turn away from the truth that we know, if we would turn away from the Lord Jesus Christ, you have no idea of the darkness that crashes down upon you. It may not be possession of exactly the same kind that we read here, but nevertheless it is a darkness of that kind. I have come across this a lot, that people seem to think that if they turn away from Jesus Christ, that is somehow a very rational decision that they have made for themselves, and life isn’t really going to change very much, except that perhaps you get rid of a few annoying customs and duties that you otherwise have to perform, and they don’t see their life as descending into darkness. But if you look at it from the eyes of scripture and if you look at these people if contrast to their former lives, we see very much this case. People fall into great darkness.

And here we have the covenant people of God. God’s own covenant nation. And yet we read that there were many people in Capernaum, people of the covenant, who were possessed by demons. Verse 34, and verse 39 likewise, and all of Galilea was the same story, there were many of God’s people who were possessed. What a terrible indictment that is on Israel. But it also shows the kind of darkness that you will find if you turn from the living God.

Also like to note, somewhat in passing, that there are many people around today, and unfortunately I have sometimes heard this in our own churches. People who suggest that demon possession is really just mental illness. That the people in Bible times they really didn’t know about mental illness, so when they saw schizophrenics or people who were having psychotic episodes, they wrongly assumed that it was possession by demons. And I have heard that sometimes from people in our churches.

In answer to that I would like you to note that Mark distinguishes illness from possession in verse 34. He distinguishes the healing of various kinds of illnesses from the casting out of demons. And he also makes a clear distinction between the awareness of the demons and the consciousness or awareness of the human personalities of the possessed. They are not the same. And this observation about these distinctions, this is not just for Mark, not just for the man who didn’t know much about mental illness, this is something that is inspired by the Holy Spirit. And it is only if you have a very liberal view of the scripture, where you regard the Bible as written, at least partly by fallible men, it is only then, that you can take this kind of view of Mark’s account, and ignore those distinctions, and say – Oh well, it is just superstition of the time.

Further evidence of Jesus’ deliberate plan to spread His fame is seen in verse 39. He began to go into the synagogues throughout Galilee preaching and casting out demons. Hardly an action of someone who wants to remain unobtrusive. Galilee was a region of many large villages and cities, and the Lord, it appears, hit the population centres. The places that were large enough to have synagogues. Ensuring that His message - the gospel of the Kingdom, and His miracles - the miracles of the Kingdom, that these would be widely known in the whole region. This is maximal exposure – not minimal. Then we have the account of the healing of the leper. Verses 40-45. The leper begged Jesus on his knees. And he did that with an uncommon faith, which when we come across that elsewhere in the Scripture, the centurion and so on, and those who said, ‘Lord, if you are willing’. In other words, ‘I will submit to your will, but I know You can do it’. That is an uncommon faith in New Testament times. And the Lord Jesus filled with compassion says – “I am willing”. Showing His own recognition of His own authority as God, and also showing the power of His will, that simply by saying “I am willing, be cleansed” His simple word can accomplish that healing, a word of such power showing His nature.

But also by touching the leper the Lord showed that compassion, what we could call the law of love if you like, that compassion was something that at times could override the ceremonial law of the Old Testament. And we find this in many ways the fact, that normally, the ceremonial law in the Old Testament meant certain things couldn’t be done on the Sabbath, we would say that certain things still shouldn’t be done on the Sabbath, but there were many things that could not be done by way of work on the Sabbath in the Old Testament, but out of love you could help people and you could even help animals out of concern for them. And here too, we find the ceremonial law says – a leper who is unclean, according to the ceremonial law, he has to keep away from those who are clean. They are not allowed to come that close that they can touch each other. But the Lord Jesus reaches out and touches the man, who had already come too close to Him. And in a sense, this is against Leviticus 13. But the Lord Jesus, as the Lord of the Law, has the right to say this and the right to do this. Quite apart from the necessity of the Law of Love, He has the right to do it. To make exceptions to the ceremonial law. RC Sproul comments on it like this – he gives an example, and illustration, he says it’s like – if you have a policeman directing traffic and motioning for the cars to go through a red light at an intersection where there has been a bad accident. And we understand that is an exception. You don’t normally go through a red light. But the policeman has the authority to say, this time you go through a red light.

So the Lord Jesus makes that exception. But after healing the man He then tells him to go to the priest in Jerusalem, and as he is required to do in Lev. 14, as a cleansed leper, to get the priest to check him over and pronounce him cleansed and also to make offerings for that cleansing. And He says this is to be done as a testimony to the priests, a testimony that the Lord Jesus does uphold the Old Testament law. He does uphold Leviticus, but also a testimony as to who Jesus is, that the priests might believe who Jesus is. And that again is publicity of a kind. It is a publicity which, in the event, even though through the disobedience of the leper saying more than he was supposed to, but the publicity is such a huge reaction that Jesus had trouble entering the cities of Galilee thereafter, verse 45. Which again, surely is something that the Lord knew would happen, even though He ordered the leper not to speak so widely.

Clearly, then, the Lord Jesus had a mandate. He had a commission to spread the fame of God, to advance the gospel and therefore to do His kingdom heralding, His preaching and also to do kingdom miracles, to show and tell in other words, what God was doing in sending the Messiah.

Jesus’ unique work in doing that, His unique place in doing that, is that He is the centre of attention in the coming of the kingdom. Whereas, we, who also have a calling, as we read in the Old Testament, as we read in the New Testament, we have a calling as Christian people to spread the fame of God abroad. We do not have quite the same calling that Jesus had, certainly not, because we are not the Messiah – our job is not to point to ourselves, to the coming of ourselves, our place is to point to the Lord Jesus Christ, to proclaim His name, to proclaim the coming of the king, the coming of the Saviour, that is the central message that we are to bring to others. And as I have said before, there are many temptations for the church to be diverted into focussing too much, on the very ethical issues around. They are important, those issues, they need to be addressed, and the church has a prophetic role in standing up and saying ‘no’ to society, ‘this is not the way to go – and this will bring you into darkness.’ But the first and foremost thing that we need to say and be known for saying is bringing the gospel of the kingdom, that the king and Saviour has come, and whatever else we say, it should not overshadow that central message. As we bring that message, we are not to do so on our own terms, as the leper tried to do it his way, contrary to the relative silence that the Lord Jesus placed upon him. He thought he knew the best way to show his gratitude to God, and to bring honour to God, but he did it contrary to the word of the Lord Jesus Christ. And it is therefore, important for us to consider the Biblical principles of evangelism, and the Biblical principles of missions, rather than doing simply whatever we think is best. And of course, that is a huge subject that we can’t go into now. But there are many books on this that I urge you to look into, to read up on how we would go about missions and evangelism and what are the Biblical principles in that.

Well, alongside this evidence of Jesus advancing God’s kingdom and of His own reputation as part of that, we also have His efforts to restrict the growing reputation to slow it down, so the time bomb fuse burns at just the right speed and it all explodes at just the right time. Our second and final point – restricting the growing reputation.

And we see this in the way that Jesus silences the demons as He confronts and removes them, verse 34 “He was not permitting the demons to speak because they knew who He was” and this way of language implies that this was a regular kind of thing. When the Lord Jesus confronted the demons, they regularly tried to identify Him either as the Son of God, or as the Messiah, Luke 4:41, and we also saw an example of that in Mark 1:24. And as I mentioned before, this had the risk of prematurely bringing all of Jesus’ claims out into the forefront in a way that could increase opposition and bring about a reaction from the Jewish leaders and people too soon.

Consider also the Lord’s retreat as another example of slowing things down. Consider the Lord’s retreat to the place of solitude to pray. Verses 35-38. A man who is filled with himself in the wrong way might have played the audience to the full at this point. He had the whole city outside the door, eating out of His hand. And He could have played up to that crowd, for sure. But instead of consolidating His control, and increasing His popularity, He got up before daybreak and He disappeared to a quiet spot to pray. You find a similar action of the Lord Jesus in Mark 6:46, also after the clamour of a huge crowd, the feeding of the 5000; and you find it again in Mark 14:32ff in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is not only true to say that the Lord Jesus went away on these occasions to pray, as a Man who needed to honour God, because as a Man he had to pray and honour and thank and praise God like we do, only He did it perfectly, for us. As a man, He also needed to pray in order to be strengthened. And that is also the same for us. If we are to receive spiritual strength through communion with God, we need to be praying regularly.

And all of that is true about the Lord Jesus as a Man. But it is also because the Lord Jesus used these times, as much as we know the content of those prayers, He used these times to reaffirm His commitment to the plan of God, to say literally in one case as it were, Not My will, but Yours. And especially at times when the clamour of the crowd threatened to divert that commitment to God’s program and plan for the Messiah. And all of this shows the nature of our prayer, also, to honour God, to express that it is His will and not ours. That is what our prayer is when we say, ‘Not my will, but Yours’ every time we pray – that is what we are saying. But also to be strengthened for service so our prayer follows the nature of that of the Lord Jesus.

Here the Father’s course or will for Him, Not my will, but Yours, is not the full manifestation of the son of God in all his infinite power and glory, all authority in heaven and earth – that will be shown later. He has it, but it will be manifested later, after He has finished His work. But at this point the program is a gradual unveiling that leads on to that victory.

Thus when Simon and the others eventually track Him down, and they press their program upon Him, a very human program, and they do it by an implied rebuke “Lord, don’t You know that everyone is looking for You”, in other words, “what are You doing out here praying in isolation, You should be up front speaking to the crowds, winning the crowds over, increasing Your popularity. In answer to that the Lord gives them God’s program – ‘let’s go somewhere else’ – in verse 38. And then He adds a very clear statement of that purpose – “so that I may preach there also, for that is what I came for”. And that proclamation is followed up by afterwards going on a tour of all the synagogues throughout Galilee – verse 39, where He could do just that – preach, as well as do the miracles of healing and casting out demons.

So in this statement, we see the Lord’s priority. It is not that publicity as such is a problem, something to be totally avoided, because the Lord seeks it at times. Nor is it that exorcisms and healings are a problem to be avoided as such, because they show the nature of God’s kingdom. They show God’s kingdom as a place where Satan is cast out. As a place where sin is removed. As a place where the misery of sin is removed and its consequences – disease and such things, where all of that is undone. In other words it shows God’s kingdom as a place of cleansing; as a place of healing; and as a place of salvation. But the miracles of exorcism and healing, they need to be set in the context of the preaching. They need to be set in the context of the heralding of the gospel. They are demonstrations of what Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God. Rather than putting things the other way around, and making the miracles first and putting the preaching second. And that is one of the big problems that the Lord Jesus deals with following God’s program by limiting the impact of His ministry at this stage. Saying, in other words, that healing and such things are not to be the number one priority – the truth of the gospel, that is to be the number one. And this was the problem with Israel, the desire for signs and wonders as an end in itself. And this is the problem with much Pentecostalism today. The desire for healing and health and wealth and those kind of things – the health and wealth gospel. The desire for such things at the expense of hearing the gospel.

And so the Lord Jesus moved on. He made the preaching as central as He could. Though of course, many men in their sin still insisted on taking these things the wrong way.

Similarly we find the leper being warned sternly not to tell anyone other than the priest in Jerusalem, verse 44 – though the Lord Jesus knew the outcome of this, he no doubt knew that the man wouldn’t listen to Him, but nevertheless, he made clear what was required of him. The man ignores that, and he goes out like an evangelist and he proclaims the news freely and he spreads it widely, verse 45. And note the result of that, Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city because of this. But He had to stay in the unpopulated areas. Even there, people came to Him from all over, but the problem was that by spreading the news about this healing with this hunger that these people had for signs and wonders and miracles as an end in itself, it complicated things with the city ministry from then on. The leaking of too much information, too quickly, in a sense, hindered Jesus’ preaching in the synagogues.

There is another reason too, for the Lord Jesus placing these limitations which we see in all of these matters, and that is the fact that by Jesus telling the people to keep it quiet at times, it does demonstrate also His humility. And we see not someone Who is interested in His own personal glory, at the expense of the glory of God, His glory as a man, but we see someone who is perfect in His humility and willing to set aside the wrong kind of glory in order to be sure that God, and God alone, receives the right kind of glory on God’s terms.

As indicated before, we do not have restrictions today on the amount of information that we can tell others about the Lord Jesus. And we should be thankful that we live in that time of privilege when we can go out anywhere we like and we can tell people as much as we can possibly tell them about the Lord Jesus and about the Bible. And that is a great freedom. But we do need to ensure that we call on people to believe because the gospel is true. And because by believing, they are honouring the living God. In other words, we put God first in this, rather than pressing on people that they ought to believe, for man-centred reasons. Health and wealth reasons. Become a Christian and then you will get wealthy. Or all of your diseases will be healed in this life at this time - if you have enough faith – that kind of message. Or perhaps telling people that they should believe because they will get on a spiritual high if they do – well, I think we all know the truth about that – that the highs are not so frequent, more most of us I suspect, and going through struggles is more the norm for the Christian life. But some people do that, they try and spread the gospel by saying – I heard it once on a TV ad, in the days when they used to run Christian TV ads, ‘get high, get Jesus’. That kind of approach – or telling people you will have such a sense of peace if you believe, or telling people you will get pie in the sky if you believe, or you’ll get a stable social life and your relationships will start to work, and your life won’t be the mess that it’s been – most of which may be true – and certainly there are benefits in being a Christian. In fact, we don’t even know the half of it, even in terms of understanding what is revealed to us, we don’t know the half of the benefits we have in Christ. And I dare say that when we come before the Lord and experience those blessings in their fullness, we might say – “I never knew it was that good”. There is no doubt about the peace or eternal blessings in the Lord Jesus Christ, but we also need to remember we are not in it for ourselves first. Our calling is to spread the fame of God by His grace, to praise Him, and to thank Him and to serve Him and to do all of that before others, and to tell of the name of the Lord in Zion. And to do so, until all of the peoples of the world have come to know the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, leading on to the day when every knee will bow before Him.

AMEN

Let us pray

Heavenly Father, you have given us such freedom in this age in which we live and so many opportunities also through the technology available today, to spread the gospel very widely indeed. And we pray that You will help us to use that freedom to proclaim Jesus Christ and His kingdom, rather than keeping our light under a bushel. Help us to do so in a way that puts the glory of God in the centre, while also making clear that the Lord Jesus does indeed meet the sinners’ needs. But Father, we do not want to put the needs of man in the centre and the Lord Jesus merely as an end to the purpose of blessing man. We want to put You, we want to put the Lord Jesus in the centre and us, as the ones who are called to serve and glorify You. Will you enable us Father, to make a start in doing that. We pray in Jesus name, AMEN.