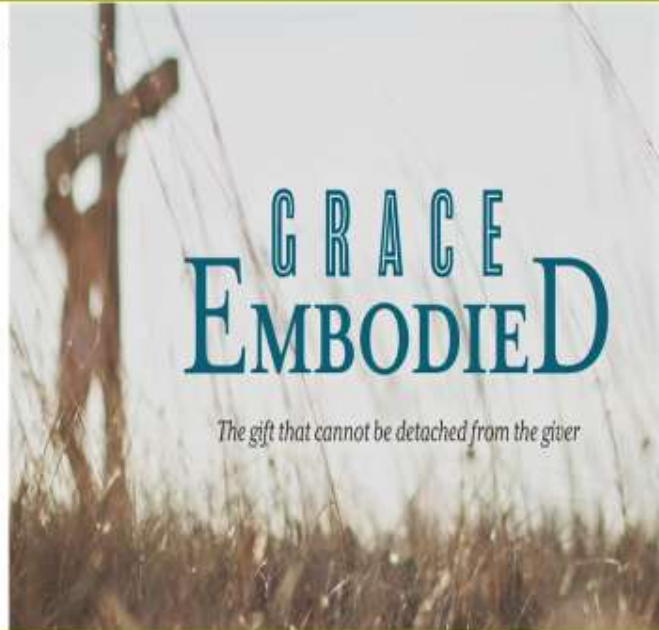


Second Sunday of Lent

25th February 2018

Mark 2:1-12

Rev John Barr



Rex is a rough-edged, self-depreciating, quiet sort of fellow. He drinks heavily most nights in the local bar wiling the time away with his mates watching the Fox-sports channel. During the day Rex drives a taxi cab around the city of Broken Hill where he has lived all his life.

Rex is ill. He is very ill with a diagnosis of stomach cancer that has given him only a matter of months to live. Adamant he won't die a miserable death in hospital, Rex decides to drive north to Darwin where he has learnt there is a doctor who is willing to carry out euthanasia.

While Rex's life is coming to an end he has never learnt how to love. He does enjoy a kind of romance with a lonely Aboriginal neighbour across the street who regularly keeps a close eye on him, brings him food and comforts him.

But Rex lacks the courage to openly love this woman as he suddenly tells Polly he is off to Darwin to die. Polly is furious. She is left dejected and despondent as Rex's yellow Ford sedan disappears down the street in a puff of red dust.

The movie, Last Cab to Darwin, starring Michael Caton, is a story about a man who eventually re-assesses choices about life. On the 3,000 kilometer trek north to Darwin, Rex picks up a couple of passengers. They are all fleeing one thing or another and their adventures are stories in themselves.

(2)

Up in Darwin, Rex seeks his end. But he is confused by all the red-tape. Moreover, Rex is confronted by what appears to be a shallow, clinical, matter-of-fact approach towards death. Rex feels empty. He feels hollow and somewhat despairing.

In all of this, Rex secretly yearns to return home to put things in order, to see his mates and to say appropriate goodbyes to those who are significant in his life.

So Rex turns south. Still fully aware of his impending, painful death, Rex makes the long journey back home. After many days of arduous driving, the yellow cab pulls up in front of Rex's old house. Polly is there waiting for him. Their eyes meet.

Rex and Polly settle down together on the front verandah. In the glow of a glorious outback sunset they begin to have a long chat.

Rex's life may be nearly over. But in these few short months he is learning more about life than ever. As one critic put it, this is a film - not about discovering how to die - rather it's a story about discovering how to love.



Simone Weil, a French philosopher, mystic and political activist, speaks about the *“empty spaces”* in our lives. These spaces are very real. But so often they are overlooked or ignored in the wake of a world where everything is said to be governed by the laws of cause and effect. Here we get sick so we die.

(3)

We break the law so we are punished. We sin and we are condemned. We do good and we are rewarded.

Simone Weil says these empty spaces in our lives are not subject to such laws of cause and effect. Rather, they are special places longing and waiting to be filled by grace. They are unexplainable voids yearning to be touched by God.

In the cab driver, Rex's case, this void concerned the need to love. This void, this deep chasm could not be dealt with through the intervention of a process that would effectively kill him. The laws of cause and effect said Rex was going to die – and that was it!

With this confronting reality in mind, Rex thought he should just get on with it. Rex wanted to just get it over with as efficiently and painlessly as possible. Euthanasia offered such a solution. But Rex soon learnt there is more to life, there is much more.

Rather than addressing the problem of cause and effect in our lives, I believe Jesus' ministry is actually all about addressing the voids, the chasms and the empty spaces we all encounter.

For you see, Jesus ministry is not about the cause and effect things that impact on our lives. Jesus does not play around with what appears to be pre-determined or, indeed, inevitable outcomes.

Rather, Jesus intervenes in peoples' lives to bring about complete wholeness of being. It's not so much a case of being freed from the consequence of effects like cancer, dementia or parkinsons. It's more, much more!

It's a case of having the heart and soul of who we are - addressed. It's a matter of having that "God space" nurtured and filled with an unconditional love that empowers us to love and to live life, as limited as it may be, to the absolute fullest.

So often in Jesus' time those who he healed were people who had been cast aside and were told they were of little or no worth. As people suffering mental illness, blindness, paralysis and other infirmities, they were seen to be either impure or tainted with evil and, therefore, socially unacceptable.

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This is because the community believed sickness and death were the consequences of something that was wrong in a person's life. Becoming ill and dying were the effects of a cause that is called sin.

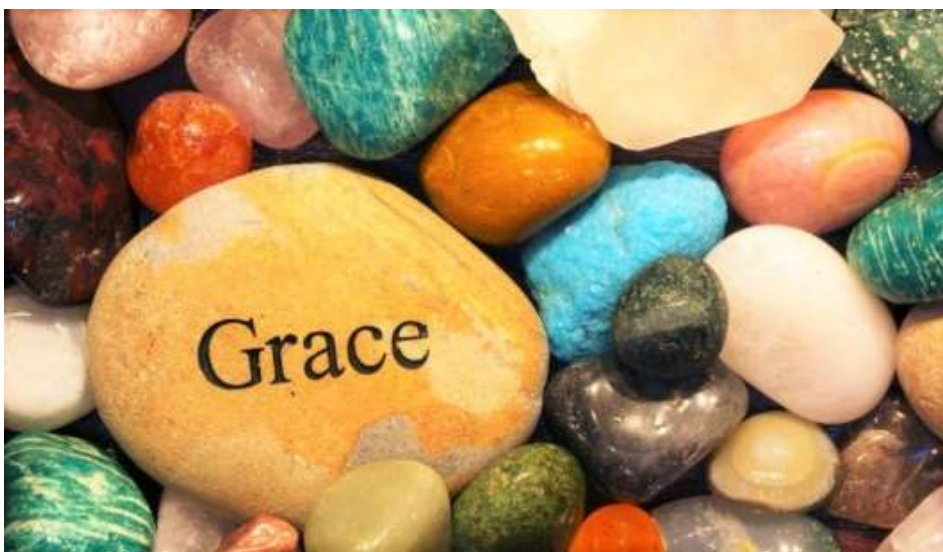
These were punishments for all the bad things done in one's life. But Jesus says there is more to life than this crazy "cause and effect" stuff. There is more to being human than a cold inevitability that drives people like the cab driver, Rex, to seek euthanasia.

For, there is a place in everyone's heart that yearns for God. There is a place in each of our lives which is designed for God - and the mercy, compassion, the love and the grace that this brings.

This is what Jesus does when he heals people. Jesus is not a magic man. Jesus is not a shaman. Jesus is not a witchdoctor. Jesus is not a faith healer. Jesus didn't come to wave a wand to magically disappear all our troubles and woes. Rather, Jesus comes to fill our lives with what matters most. And that is the unconditional, unmerited love of God that we call grace.

Moreover, Jesus is the manifestation, the face and the very being of this grace. And here Jesus cuts through all the hype, the anxiety and the fears we may have about death and dying by offering us more, much more.

Jesus offers us that grace which fills the voids, occupies the chasms and takes up the empty spaces to bring about a wholeness of being that enables us go on and live life despite the harsh effects, the limitations and the inevitabilities that plague us all.



(5)

And friends, this is real, authentic healing. Real, authentic healing takes place when Jesus touches our lives and fills our empty spaces with the unconditional love of God. Healing in the truest sense comes when Jesus fills those “God spaces” with an unconditional love that nurtures, frees and empowers us to go on.

This morning we read from Mark’s Gospel. On face value, this appears to be a miraculous healing as the paralysed man is lowered through the roof of that crowded house.



Jesus was deeply affirmed by the degree of faith demonstrated here. Jesus was also, no doubt, deeply moved by the sick man’s predicament. Moreover, Jesus was irritated and provoked by the attitudes of the scribes who were keen to question him.

For you see, these scribes were the gate keepers of tradition. They were the guardians of that system which condemned the sick, who claimed their sickness was brought upon them because of their sins and who maintained such people were, therefore, of little or no worth.

But Jesus comes on the scene to declare that, while all this “cause and effect” stuff may be ruling the roost and determining peoples’ lives, Jesus comes to reveal, Jesus comes to enact, Jesus comes to dispense God’s grace upon all those who reach out to him.

(6)

And this grace lifts people up, this grace empowers people, this grace offers people a new purpose and a new direction in life.

If we look at the text of Mark's Gospel we see that Jesus immediately goes beyond the cycle of cause and effect as he says to the paralysed man: "*your sins are forgiven*". Here Jesus demonstrates that sin no longer has a role in the story.

Friends, it's not the issue of sin, which is said to cause this man's debilitating ailment, that matters. Rather, it's the presence of Jesus, the embodiment of God's grace that makes all the difference.

And real healing takes place as Jesus commands the man to "*Stand up and take your mat and go to your home*".

I believe we are to take these words of Jesus here figuratively. To "*stand up, take your mat and go home*" is a reference to the liberating grace Christ imparts in this man's life.

This is much the same as it was for Rex, the cab driver, when he realizes it's time to stop his preoccupation with dying, get back in his car, drive the long journey back from Darwin to his home in Broken Hill, connect with his loyal mates and seek out his neighbor whose love for him is quite special.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus, the embodiment of God's grace, comes to offer real healing to each and every one of us. This is a healing, not of the physical illnesses that beset us. This is a healing, not of the manifest challenges and worries that haunt us every day.

Rather, the healing Jesus offers is a filling of that void. It's nurturing of that empty "God-space" in each of our lives. It's an empowering of that chasm that so often leaves us hollow and without hope.

As we journey ever closer to Easter, remember God's grace. Remember Jesus, who is the embodiment of that grace. And remember, it is God's grace that can truly heal you.

For, it is God's grace that nurtures, empowers and gives you hope to face the ongoing realities of life.

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It is God's grace, so freely given to you in Jesus Christ, that enables you to engage with those ever present and often terrifying challenges.

It is God's grace offered in Jesus Christ that leads you on.

So, *"stand up and take your mat....and walk!"*

Amen.

