

Folks, the service is up on our YouTube and Facebook pages...the links are:

<https://www.facebook.com/WestFlamChurch/>

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCneF9IOARvh5R30Fzm-1ySA?view_as=subscriber

Ian

An Authoritative Teaching
Mark 1:21-28
January 31, 2021

During this lectionary year the Gospel of Mark will be focus for the year. What kind of Jesus does Mark provide for us readers and preachers? We will, I think, appreciate his economy of language, his action pace throughout, and his short but dramatic portrait of our Lord in words and actions. We begin today with his account of Jesus' first public teaching moment in the synagogue at Capernaum.

Most of us have memories of the days when entering church was like going into the library. Everything seemed breathlessly quiet, formal and darkly authoritarian. No flamboyant movement or emotional outburst permitted. Children sit up straight or else! You remember, don't you? I would image it was less true in the synagogue, but there would still have been order that was generally accepted.

I remember so well the one or two occasions when my elder brother and I would sit in church with my father. In some ways the service was probably similar in tone to the synagogue service in Capernaum. It was quiet, solemn and respectful. And so slowly but surely my brother would drift off to sleep. Within this framework of control and reverence there was no chance of disruption. If the Spirit should ever threaten to break into this setting one could only hope that she did so quietly and decently and in an orderly fashion.

Mark moves us quickly, as is his custom, from Jesus at his baptism, followed by the temptation in the wilderness, and the calling of the four disciples-James, John, Peter and Andrew. Then the four follow

him to his new home base, Capernaum where they go to the synagogue on the Sabbath. But this will be no ordinary service of reading, prayers and teaching. Instead, we are introduced to Jesus who is immediately thrust into a confrontation with the powers of evil. These powers confront his authority to question the traditions of the elders and scribes. Mark wants us to know that the Jesus of his gospel will be confronted by the Jewish authorities over his life and teaching. He simply doesn't conform to any settled notion of Messiah. His first teaching event certainly made an immediate impression. **First** of all, he teaches very differently from the religious leaders of his day. Mark probably doesn't necessarily mean that the scribes were boring, wrong or weak! Their style was to pass on the teachings handed down by the elders and the oral traditions in a rote and academic style. In short, it would have been derivative, bookish, and often difficult to relate to ordinary life. In other words, Jesus speaks directly and with authority, on the meaning of the scriptures for life.

Ordinary folk are surprised and riveted by his teaching. Jesus approaches the scriptures with a freshness they hadn't experienced. He speaks to the congregation, as Mark records, with authority. I don't think it was because he raised his voice and made dramatic gestures as he spoke that caused the people to respond in amazement. Rather I think it would have been the fact that he related these scriptures to their lives. His teaching reached their hearts and minds that opened them up to God in a new and fresh way.

Secondly, he not only had authority, but also power to grapple with the demons of life. Imagine the scene for a moment. As Jesus steps out of the readers spot, the normally hushed quiet is suddenly shattered by the screaming voice of a man standing near the back shouting out: *What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? ...I know who you are, the Holy One of God.* The sense here is something like, why are you picking this fight?" or "Couldn't you have just left things as they were between us?"

In response, Jesus didn't say let's have a quiet word of prayer, or please usher do get that man out of our holy place. No, Jesus responds in an equally commanding voice, *be silent, and come out of him!* Jesus instead performs an exorcism.

My earliest memory of an authoritative voice was my **father's**. When he spoke, I jumped! If not, there were dire consequences. I learned the hard way that to disobey was to suffer. Then there was dear **Ms. Kidd** my primary teacher for seven years. She was a tall, rather homely spinster who seemed to relish the belt. We had to sit up straight, obey, keep quiet, keep in line when leaving, put our hands up straight, or else. Then in high school I had **Mr. Good** who taught English. In his class one dare not disobey. He had the bearing and style of authority. You couldn't even put your hand up straight. We were only allowed to put our hand up as far as our shoulder or we were in trouble. Somehow his voice, his bearing, his black robe, and his stern face, kept me and all my classmates in absolute terror.

From our history and experience we are unlikely candidates to understand stories of exorcisms like this one in Capernaum. Evil spirits, a man convulsing in the middle of worship, yelling out and then being rebuked by Jesus and made well is not easily relatable to our normal worship experiences. This is not at all like the Hollywood take on exorcisms: spinning heads, cursing God, convulsing, and yelling as the priest recites his formula with the cross held out like a gun by a gangster holding up a store. This is a man released from the cage in which he is trapped by the evil spirit.

Through this first story in Mark of Jesus' ministry we glimpse characteristics of his reign. It is intrusive, and breaks old boundaries that benefited the elite and powerful. It is about liberating people from the powers that afflict them. It is about articulating God's intentions for the world, defying or reconfiguring some traditions to do so.

We would do well to remember that spiritual powers, both good and evil, were everywhere accepted as real in the Near Eastern world of Jesus' day. This was as natural to them as the Internet is to us today. Yes, Jesus confronted the powers of darkness throughout his ministry for this was commonly accepted in his day. He made many deeply disturbed folk whole throughout his public ministry. Indeed, his enemies accused him of being on the side of these dark forces.

This man in the synagogue was obviously troubled deeply. The message paraphrase puts it like this: *a man who was deeply disturbed and yelling out...* Jesus seeks to free him and all he suffers,

whether of mind or body. As one interpreter notes, the Greek verb *is something like an onomatopoeia, to capture the loud croaking of a bird. Hence, "squawked,"* would give us the sense of what this sounded like. The text reads like this: *And immediately there was in their synagogue a man in an unclean spirit, and it squawked out*

Possession is not so foreign to us as we might imagine. Who hasn't been possessed by anger, by envy, by disappointment, by jealousy, all that is clearly not healthy for us? And yes, even commonly accepted maladies such as workaholism, materialism, greed, among many, have an unhealthy influence on us. And yes, Jesus in fact releases people from these burdens today, just as he released the troubled man in the synagogue.

And so, I can't help thinking that the first impressions we have of Jesus in Mark is one who is a boundary breaker. God is bursting through, from his baptism to this confrontation with the troubled man. Mark introduces Jesus, not with a nice sermon, but with an exorcism, with a breaking through the darkness of evil and anti-god forces, both in us and in the systems of our world. He confronts them, as he is the bearer of good news and the bringer near of the kingdom of God. He breaks through the piles of scripture traditions built up over centuries that the scribes happily dish out Sabbath by Sabbath. He speaks directly and with authority, interpreting the scriptures with clarity and relevance. No wonder he had them spellbound!

So, let me ask us, what's our first impression of Jesus as he comes to us in Mark? And does that impression stay with you as you reflect on this story in Mark? Does he help us in our private battles with those forces within and without that we often seem unable to resist? God's kingdom of love, and peace and joy are brought near in him.

Imagine if such a Jesus were to present himself in our Sunday morning worship! What would we think? How would we react? The scene is bewildering, shocking, and confusing to our modern, sophisticated minds. This is not the serene, quiet, orderly worship experience we commonly meet on Sunday morning. Not only are we left with questions, but also the simple folk of Capernaum witness something that day they have never seen before. They respond, *what*

is this? A New teaching-with authority? He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.

So, I invite us to think of those places of brokenness or disappointment or fear in our lives. This Jesus in the synagogue in Capernaum does not stand aloof from these challenges or shortcomings but rather draws nearest to us precisely in these moments. But not only us, surely! We have family, friends, neighbours who battle against forces unseen and powerful that weight them down and defeat them. Perhaps Epiphany is a season to remind us of the Jesus revealed in Mark who opposes these evil forces and defeats them. God is still at work casting out the unclean spirits of the world, and God is using us to continue our Lord's work.

Amen