

The Fourth Sunday of Epiphany,

Deuteronomy 18.15-20; Ps 111; **Mark 1.21-28**

Let's begin with the obvious. The gospel reading we heard sometimes referred to as "The man with an unclean Spirit" does not sit comfortably with many Christians today. It begs questions. What is an unclean spirit? Why is this man possessed? And then there is the word exorcism. Many people of my generation when they hear the word exorcism will immediately think of the film "The Exorcist". What can we do? We have a choice. We can dismiss this episode as something we have overcome or we can engage with it. We shall engage with it, especially as in Mark's gospel, the gospel set for the year, a number of themes emerge.

We heard Mark set the scene in one sentence, "Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught." The first thing we note is the day of the week. It is the Sabbath. A day of rest for the Jewish people. A day they are called to set aside and to keep holy and by which they honour God. The place God has in their lives. Not only they, but also any other people living and working in their households keep this day, the Sabbath. On this day they are to do no manner of work. It is a day that sets them apart from their gentile neighbours. We note the location of today's encounter. It is a synagogue. A synagogue in Capernaum in Galilee by Lake Tiberias, the Sea of Galilee.

We note what Jesus does on the Sabbath in a synagogue in Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee. He teaches. Twice elsewhere in Mark's gospel people refer to Jesus as Teacher. In Capernaum he is known as the Teacher by the leader of the synagogue and his household. In Jerusalem the disciples go to secure a room for the Passover saying, "The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?" We note that Jesus does not teach as the scribes do, but as one having authority. The scribes don't often receive a good press in the New Testament. In the main this is because they fail to see who Jesus is as told by the early Christians, who like the scribes were Jews. The scribes' schools

and traditions, their way of learning, their exposition of biblical texts blinds them to the new. The authority that they have comes through being able to read and write, their study of the Torah and the other writings. They are soaked in their studies. It gives them a standing in the community and it gives them authority. Jesus has authority. He teaches with authority, but it is unlike that of the scribes.

Authority is the crucial word, but it is not only as a Teacher, but also as a healer who has authority over unclean spirits, who could have healed the man on another day rather than the Sabbath, but chooses to heal on the Sabbath implying through the whole corpus of the New Testament that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath.

Mark begins his gospel with a one sentence introduction followed by a prophecy in which the Prophet tells of a messenger who will prepare the way of the Lord, the way of God.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight” ’.

Jesus has authority. He has authority as a Teacher. He has an authority that is other. This is evidenced by the nod to him being Lord of the Sabbath in today’s gospel, but there are other forms of authority and these are spelled out. There is the stilling of the storm at the Sea of Galilee. If Jesus the Christ is the Son of God then his authority does not only embrace his commanding teaching, his teaching style, his crossing of boundaries; it possesses other dimensions succinctly summed up by all the others in attendance in the synagogue by the sea of Galilee, the Galilee of the Gentiles on that Sabbath day, ““What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him””. Mark is already inviting us to see Jesus, the Son of God.

Jesus' authority embraces not only a new teaching, but is also permeated by a new ordering of things, which we can sum up, guided by today's gospel as healing – and here we need to be more specific – as exorcism. Exorcism is a large part of Jesus's healing ministry in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Unclean spirit means impure spirit, showing its Jewish context, contrasting with the Spirit that descends on Jesus at his baptism. In some way or other the man that makes himself known to Jesus in the synagogue is not himself and the spirit or spirits that indwell him see Jesus as a threat. This man is out of sorts. He is impure. Jesus can make him whole, can make him clean, to keep with the biblical language. Jesus can make him right. Whatever the impurities they have taken hold of this man. They are now a part of him, possibly concealed to others, until Jesus appears. They dwell in him. Again location is important. We are in the synagogue in Capernaum on the Sabbath and amongst God's people. Here an encounter takes place. It is a struggle. It is fight with spiritual dimensions. This is not a comfortable moment. We are reminded of the heavens being torn apart.

One of the things that ring true in today's gospel and may have left you puzzled is that we speak of an unclean spirit while the unclean spirit speaks of itself first in the plural and ends in the singular adding to the confusion of the identity of this unclean spirit or is it unclean spirits: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." Later in Mark's gospel Jesus will encounter a man on the other side of the lake who is possessed by an unclean Spirit. This unclean spirit refers to itself as follows, 'My name is Legion; for we are many.' A legion being some 5000 Roman soldiers strong.

It is worth spending a moment on the question of one or many unclean spirits as this has a ring of truth to it for today. In the cacophony of voices of our today it can seem that you are speaking to a person, but that they there are made up of many conflicting voices raging within them being tossed this way and that. Let's try that again. We present ourselves as being one to the other, as one entity, while being constituted by many voices and even conflicting voices. Many of those voices are vying for our attention, our loyalty, our

commitment contrary to God's will. They have taken up their home within us. Often they occupy consciously or unconsciously, knowingly and unknowingly space in our lives. On what grounds and with what authority do these voices speak? Jesus does not come to destroy. Jesus comes to make all things new. This will involve struggle. This will involve a fight. This will involve confrontation. It will involve exorcism. It will involve healing. It is uncomfortable. It is uncomfortable even painful to admit to oneself that one has been following false gods, especially for the enlightened.

Let's now turn our attention to the unclean spirit or is it the spirits who asks, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" This is a good and timely question to ask. What has Jesus to do with the Church, the Body of Christ? Well... Everything. What does Jesus have to do with my life? Well.... Hopefully... the answer is everything. What has Christ to do with Christ Church in Vienna? Simply put... everything. What holds us together is not so much activity, but our recognition of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God and the claim this Jesus has on our lives in a good way based on our profession of faith while recognising who he is, the Holy One of God, the giver of life. What does Christ have to do with Creation? Everything. What does Jesus have to do with shaping the world today? Everything. He is Lord of the Sabbath! He is Lord of Creation! He is Lord of our lives! "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" can easily be rephrased in a more immediate way, What Jesus of Nazareth do you have to do with me? Have you come to destroy me? Emphatically No. This is not how we experience Christ! He has come to make all things new beginning with you and me and it is beautiful bringing to completion that which he has begun in us.

Many are the voices that are vying for our attention and not only for attention, but want a claim on our lives desiring authority an authority that belongs to Christ. They are legion. This has only increased with modern forms of communication and social media. We often don't know who to listen to. We often listen to the wrong people. We don't know who to believe. We don't know who to follow. What is their authority based on? Our touchstone at Christ Church must be Christ, who heals, who exorcises the demons that plague us, plague our today, having taken ahold of us. As a word picture that addresses our ailments

this gospel is current, ever topical. Some are possessed by the cult of personality, some by obsessions of various kinds, addictions they cannot overcome. Brueggemann an American Old Testament scholar lists acquisitiveness amongst them.

God in Jesus supplies strength to overcome, to be made new, to put things in order, while unmasking in the heart of the synagogue, in the heart of the Church, in our hearts those who are possessed and deceived by the ideologies of our today. Those who put their strength in horses, in the strength of human legs or despots leaning on the psalmist are being called to put their trust in God anew by listening to his voice, but first they must become silent that they may listen so that they may obey and follow. Be silent and come out! commands Jesus with authority. It is an authority that transcends that of the scribes. As a common narrative the Gospel of Jesus Christ is on the wane – a narrative endowed with authority to give purpose and direction, to liberate and bind together, to which people could be held, accompanied by God's Holy Spirit working in their lives. New and misleading ways are emerging, contrary to God's will for His people, for all those made in the glorious image of God. These new ways are old ones now dressed up in a modern guise, less easy for us to see and unmask, setting aside for example the reverence for life for a selfish this-world-only utilitarianism with a rapidity that astonishes and with a zeal He Christ will not own. No one is immune.

Be silent, and come out!