

JESUS AND THE UNSEEN WORLD

Mark 1:21-28

In this section of his Gospel Mark introduces us to a series of events which demonstrate the nature of Jesus' ministry. Our reading today, telling us of the healing of a demon possessed man in the synagogue, bears all the hallmarks of an original reminiscence told without embellishment, because this is the way it actually happened. So as we study this passage together you can find the main text on page [***] of the church bibles and all the scriptural references will be displayed on the screen behind me.

Our reading marks the beginning of a section of teaching about Jesus where we learn about who Jesus is from what he does. Mark just fits together a number of incidents with little or no editorial comment, he's letting the events speak for themselves. This particular story demonstrates to us the authority of Jesus by showing what happens when a man afflicted by an unclean spirit meets the person who had a unique anointing with God's spirit – Jesus.

Let's begin our study by looking at verse 21:

“They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach.” (verse 21)

Mark doesn't say anything about time elapsing between the events of verses 16-20 and this new story, but there must have been a gap, because the events of verses 16-20 couldn't have taken place on a Sabbath as they involve fishermen pursuing their normal occupation of fishing which would have been prohibited on a Sabbath. These new events take place in Capernaum where Jesus had apparently gone to live after leaving Nazareth (Matthew 4:13; 9:1). We don't know exactly why Jesus moved from Nazareth to Capernaum, although we can easily see a number of possible reasons. Perhaps it was because his first converts apparently lived in Capernaum, or because Capernaum was so well situated for ministry in Galilee – lying adjacent to the main trade route for the area, the Via Maris. Yet another possible reason is that Capernaum is about as distant as one

can be in Galilee from the major Hellenistic cities, especially Tiberias the capital of Herod Antipas, indeed it lies near to the border of the territory of Phillip and it was the site of a toll station. This remoteness would have helped protect Jesus from interference from political and religious leaders until his time had come.

Mark tells us that Jesus entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, apparently accompanied by Simon, Andrew, James and John who had recently become followers (verses 16-20) and began to teach. I think the fact that even Jesus went to the synagogue tells us something. If Jesus needed to honour God with his presence in the synagogue on the Sabbath, then we certainly need to be in church on Sunday.

Synagogues were places where people gathered together and the Torah was read and explained. No animal sacrifices took place in synagogues, sacrifices were only made at the temple in Jerusalem. Teaching in synagogues was carried out by members of the laity rather than the synagogue ruler and on this occasion we're told that Jesus assumed the teaching role. It was a common practice for visiting teachers to be invited to read the Scripture and to speak, a custom from which Paul as well as Jesus benefited. That Jesus was invited to speak probably indicates he had already established a reputation as a teacher and so this episode was probably not the first event in his ministry. Generally, Jesus was recognized as a teacher even by his opponents (Mark 12:19), although there is no evidence that he had ever received any formal training. Certainly he was not a typical rabbi.

Moving on to verse 22:

“The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.” (verse 22)
Mark doesn't speak of the content of Jesus' teaching. No doubt that was superb, but that is not Mark's emphasis, which is on the authority of the teaching and not its content. Mark generally emphasises the authority of Jesus' teaching rather than its content. Jesus almost always filled people with a sense of awe and wonder by what he said and did. His very presence announced the kingdom of God. The

authority of Jesus' teaching was unique because Jesus' authority was unique. Jesus didn't teach *about* God's word, he preached God's word, indeed he *was* God's word. Jesus' authority was a sovereign authority which permitted neither debate nor theoretical reflection. Jesus' authority surpassed that of the scribes and teachers of the Law because the person of Jesus surpasses them all. It confronted his hearers with the absolute claim of God upon their whole persons and it continues to confront all of us here today with that same claim. Our God demands absolute allegiance from our whole beings, from all that we are and can ever be.

Now we come to the main part of this story in verses 23 and 24:

“Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"” (verses 23-24)

Within the synagogue was a man possessed by an evil spirit. He was damaged to the extent that the evil spirit had taken over the centre of his self and now spoke through him. Perhaps you're wondering what a man possessed by an evil spirit was doing in a synagogue. Well the devil believes in God too. As A W Towzer said: "The devil is a better theologian than any of us and is a devil still." The devil knows about God but he doesn't worship him as God and the devil doesn't mind if we go to church so long as our worship is false worship. We must worship God in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).

Returning to the man possessed by an evil spirit, we have to acknowledge that as difficult as the concept of the demonic is for most people today, it can't just be swept under the carpet by claiming that it's a primitive explanation for various kinds of physical and psychological illness. That simply doesn't fit in with the scriptural material. We have to acknowledge the reality of an unseen spiritual world which contains evil or demonic powers and beings as well as good powers and beings, such as angels. It's true that we do seem to experience less demonic possession today than we read of in scripture, but an explanation for this may be that there is less evidence of the demonic today because Jesus won a decisive, although as yet

uncompleted, victory over the demonic through his ministry and most especially on the cross.

Returning to our verses, the evil spirit sensed in the very presence of Jesus a threat to its existence and the evil spirit's cry of terror in verse 24 is full of language of defence and resistance. The evil spirit knows that Jesus of Nazareth is God's son – the Holy One of God, but this spirit is not acknowledging him as Lord, it's trying to resist him – in those times the speaking of the name of an opponent was believed to grant one a degree of mastery over that opponent. But, the evil spirit understands much more clearly than the people in the synagogue the mission and authority of Jesus and the decisive significance of his presence and Mark will go on to remind us of this (Mark 3:11, 5:7). Jesus' presence implies judgement and destruction for all the demonic powers who shall be destroyed by Jesus, but it also implies a judgement for all the people present as well. Here, the demons become the second party in Mark's presentation of Jesus, following the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism (1:11), to announce Jesus' divine Sonship. In Mark's gospel it would not be until the crucifixion that a human voice would finally acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God, and that voice would be that of a Roman centurion and not that of one of the disciples (Mark 15:39). Of course, there are other acknowledgements of Jesus as the Son of God recorded in the other gospel accounts.

Much more impressive than Jesus' authority as a teacher is his mastery in the supernatural realm – look at verses 25 and 26: ““Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.” (verses 25-26)

The breaking in of God's kingdom in Jesus first begins, according to Mark, not in the human arena but in the cosmic arena, in order to bind the devil, the “strong man” (3:27) who exercises power over the natural order. Jesus first tells the demon to 'be quiet' which is a prominent theme in Mark and the first intimation of Jesus' wish to keep his identity hidden from the public. Giles introduced us to the

idea of the so called "Messianic Secret" and its importance in Mark's gospel last week. Jesus kept on performing amazing miracles and people kept testifying to this (1:45; 7:24, 36), which were strong evidence that he *was* the Messiah. But Jesus wouldn't allow his true identity to be publicly proclaimed until his time had come, until it was time for him to face the cross.

Here Jesus is demonstrating his absolute authority over the spiritual world and its demonic powers – Jesus just utters two short phrases "Be quiet" and "come out of him" and his will is done. Jesus' words had the power to bring healing into the life of the demon possessed man and they have the power to bring healing into our lives as well. The silencing and casting out of the demon was an aspect of the conflict between Jesus and Satan as I said a moment ago and this conflict between Jesus and the demonic is another important aspect of Mark's gospel. Part of the reason for the incarnation of Jesus was to triumph over the dark spiritual powers ruling over this fallen world and Mark is setting the scene for this right at the beginning of his gospel.

In verses 27 and 28 the exorcism ends in amazement:

“The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.” (verses 27-28)

All those present were completely amazed, indeed the Greek implies that they were completely astounded or astonished. William Barclay says they were 'thunderstruck'. The impression of Jesus' authority not only struck deeply into these people, but it also spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee. I think that the incident was generalized in their thinking from the single instance they have observed to the repeated instances they sense intuitively will take place. They do not fully understand who Jesus is or what his presence means, but they cannot evade the impression of having been confronted by one invested with power to which there was nothing comparable in their experience. Here was a teaching completely new in the authority with which it laid hold of those who heard it.

Of course, Jesus' teaching was not just for the benefit of those who heard him in the synagogue, but for all mankind. Similarly, Jesus' defeat of demonic powers is not just for the benefit of the man in the synagogue that Jesus set free, it's for all people everywhere. This exorcism by Jesus is astonishing not as a display of Jesus' power and grandeur but as an indication of his power of redemption for captives – it foreshadows the greater redemption that Jesus would bring to us all through his sacrifice on the cross. Jesus transformed the life of the man from whom he cast out an evil spirit and he can transform our lives too.

So, those who heard Jesus for the first time nearly 2,000 years ago were astonished. You've all heard Jesus' teaching, but what about you? Are you astonished by his teaching, by his majesty and power and his authority over all things? Even the demon knew who Jesus was and had to submit to his authority. But what about you. Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God? Will you submit to his power and authority and bow the knee and acknowledge Christ as your Lord and Master? As I said at the beginning Christ demands our absolute allegiance, the allegiance of our whole beings, of all that we are or can ever be. Let's renew our allegiance to him this morning or if you've never given Christ your allegiance then I urge you to do that right here and right now.

Let's just close with a few words of prayer. Father this morning we acknowledge the power, majesty and authority of your Son Jesus Christ. We humbly bow our knees before him and acknowledge and accept him as our Lord and Master with absolute authority over all things both material and spiritual. We give him our absolute allegiance and offer him our whole beings, all that we are or can ever be. We turn to him in faith in his saving power and thank you and him from the bottom of our hearts and minds for the salvation he has brought to all mankind through his death on the cross. In Jesus' name we pray Amen.