

Epiphany 4B, 1<sup>st</sup> February, 2009

Mark 1:21-28

*Entrusted with God's Spirit*

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*"Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit" (v.23)*

"Unclean spirits"? Or just a disturbed man with bad manners? Off his medication, maybe. Most of us in this day and age and culture would immediately read this episode as someone with some sort of mental illness being disruptive. But in Jesus' day, people saw the world around them as a world populated and influenced by both the seen and the unseen: *unclean spirits, evil spirits* or *demons*, with much power and control attributed to the unseen spiritual world. And woe betide the person who did display any sort of deviant characteristics, whether through physical affliction or disability, or behaving at odds with their inherited social roles and status. That was what was really important. Any whiff of deviancy, or of circumstances beyond the control and understanding of the community, meant you'd likely be labelled as demon possessed and ritually impure and capable of contaminating others; and ostracised, and so excluded from community life and synagogue worship. That meant, in effect, becoming something like a non-person.

Certainly a different world; we –the church and the community at large, still hold a great diversity of opinion and belief about spirit world phenomena. But there are still such huge differences in the way we live and think in our world that what's happening there in that synagogue with Jesus can remain a strange old story, nothing to do with us now in this time and place. So how do we take the stride from our culture into this story for it to have meaning for us in our lives today?

A very obvious thrust and message from this story is the greater picture of Jesus coming to replace satanic influence and damage, with restoration and healing and wholeness in people; a sign of God's reign being established in and through Jesus, the breaking in of this new kingdom of God, and the crumbling of Satan's reign, however we may want to understand Satan.

But let's pay closer attention to the setting. Mark is a very economic writer – his Gospel is short and he doesn't waste words. The setting and the "props" and the cast are significant. *"Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit"*. This man seems to appear suddenly; at least the original text gives the sense of this unclean spirit just popping up there in the synagogue; we don't read of him barging in; he was just there. We can only speculate about whether the man was an ordinary member of the synagogue population, with an unclean spirit suddenly provoked or exposed by Jesus' presence and teaching. Given that anyone known to have an unclean spirit would not have been welcomed into the synagogue, it's a reasonable guess.

Now, the synagogue was an extremely powerful institution, the heart of ordinary community life, a place for worship, debate and study, and very concerned with ensuring that ritual purity was adhered to. And the scribes – the interpreters of the Torah, the Law of God- were themselves powerful.

They were the authorities of the synagogue, and the stewards of the Judaic Law. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has confrontations with the scribes (in Matthew's gospel, it's with the Pharisees, other leaders of the synagogues; John's Gospel uses the words "the Jews" to mean the same groups of antagonists); the scribes continually challenge and provoke him about the company he keeps, and his healings (on the Sabbath and otherwise), and what seems to be his careless observance of the Law. In their eyes, this Jesus, son of Joseph the carpenter from Nazareth is a deviant, a non-conformist, potentially dangerous, a threat to social order, and quite possibly demon possessed himself. They're out to get him. He's disrupting religion! Poking sticks at holy cows! (You can see why I like Jesus)

The message flowing through the Gospel, crystallized right up front in this first story of Jesus at work, is Jesus as THE authority, instantly recognised as holding a superior authority than the scribes, recognised even by demons as "the Holy One of God". This is Jesus coming to overturn harsh and ungodly religion, turn people around from corrupting and misrepresenting the Spirit of God which should be at the heart of religion. This is Jesus the source and embodiment of true religion, of light and life; this is Jesus' kingdom in contrast with the powers of oppression and death. Jesus liberating people from the bondage of the trivia and letter of the Law, releasing them into the freedom and accessibility of the Spirit of God.

The God we read about in Psalm 111 this morning – the God of grace and compassion whose precepts are trustworthy – had become a God obscured and inaccessible in the synagogue. Ordinary God-fearing, God-loving people were made to carry a heavily oppressive yoke of having to adhere to a myriad of laws to keep on-side with God (and the religious authorities). The spirit behind God's laws and the hope of the peace and joy to be found in relationship with God had been lost, buried under petty rules and more rules. Rules and laws that ensured the religious authorities could maintain control of people's lives.

There's something deeply symbolic that goes beyond the surface story line of this passage. An unclean spirit is found in the heart of the worshipping place of God. If it hasn't burst in from the outside, it's been comfortably ensconced in synagogue life. Jesus – through his presence and teaching in the synagogue – is exposing an unholy spirit possessing the institution of religion. Where the life-giving power of God's life should be found, Jesus is exposing unholiness – things are not OK, things are not healthy in the place where God should be found. In this ancient mind-set, what arises is a confrontation between the God the life-giver and the contrary death-dealing forces who have taken control of religious life. Here we see a glimpse of Jesus' mission: to create a space, an arena, where false, destructive spirits that disfigure and deaden life are resisted and overthrown with the spirit of life. Jesus' own life.

This space, this arena of life and liberation, where people can grow into all that God has made them to be: we call it the Church. Christ's body visible in and to the world. Christ present and real in word and sacrament and deed. Christ encountered in worship, and in his people who attach their lives to his. And the church is the place where the evil, the powers and spirits that are at

work undermining creation and diminishing life are named and challenged and resisted. Or it should be that place. It doesn't matter whether these are real other-worldly, supernatural demonic powers, or whether we identify them as oppressive forces created by humankind's greed and potential for abuse and ignoring of the reality of a good and loving God. Anything that gets in the way of the grace and love and power of God being able to work for good in the lives of individuals, churches and communities are forces for evil. Anytime we -that's us as individuals and the Church - denigrate others, anytime we exclude and crush those who are different, anytime we treat people with disrespect or contempt or indignity or injustice, we are that person standing in the synagogue shouting at Jesus, challenging Jesus' authority, denying the life he has given us.

Jesus' mission was to bind these forces that would oppose the reign of God in this world, and to render them impotent. His mission was to set people free to become who and what we are created to be - as individuals, whole, joyful, and thoroughly able to know the joy of loving God and being loved by him. As a society and a world, following his ways of peace and justice, extending to others the same grace and care and sacrificial love that Christ extended to us. And the Church, Christ's body, is God's great gift as the arena for this love, justice and peace to be lived out and revealed.

The world needs such a place as it ever did. The unclean spirits are still to be found; still as life-destroying as ever; still as vocal as ever, sadly in the Church as well as outside it. And the part we play? We don't leave the exposing and resisting of the spirits of evil to "the Church" out there somewhere else. We've been entrusted with *God's* Spirit, the very spirit that has power to transform. The question is: are we open to God, for his working through us with this life transforming, world transforming, evil-opposing Spirit?