

Epiphany 4 28 January Mark 1:21-28

I have just returned from leading a retreat at Raymond Island. The theme for the retreat was "simply alive, a creative space to begin the year" I offered a safe place for people to pray, to reflect, to rest, and to create, a space for people to face their demons, their fears and hopes, openly, and to enable people to come face to face with God.

This week's Gospel reading focuses on two things, authority, and Jesus casting out a demon.

Where does Jesus authority come from? People see his authority. They give him authority. As far as I know he has no qualifications, no pieces of paper no official position, but he speaks with authority. I believe his authority comes from his relationship with God. The strength and love of God shines through him and gives him the authority to do what he needs to do, to preach, to heal, to raise the dead, to cast out Demons.

Who do you give authority to?

Over this weekend we have honored many people in this nation. People have been proposed by others because of their work, because of who they are, often because of what they do in a voluntary capacity. We see their generosity, their giftedness and we honour them. We see their authority in their actions.

So, Jesus teaches with authority, but what did Jesus actually teach?

This is the first episode in Jesus' ministry which Mark recounts after the call of the disciples. It seems we are meant to find a connection between Jesus, the teacher and Jesus, the exorcist and more than that.

The 'first point to note is that Jesus enters the synagogue on the sabbath. He is at home in his own religious tradition among his own people. Mark tells us more: he teaches. So he is not only at home there; he takes on a responsibility within that tradition: he teaches. After the powerful introduction of Mark's gospel where 'Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming, "The kingdom of God has come near.

Repent and believe the good news!", we might wonder what this Jesus is going to do. Here we have an answer: he teaches. By implication that will also be a role for the we who follow him.

The context forces us to guess what Jesus must have taught. Our best guess is to look back. Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!.. He taught about the kingdom. Our next guess is to note the sandwich structure, authority and demons: Jesus' teaching must be about forcefulness or, at least, it must have been disempowering of oppressiveness, i.e.. liberating.

And he taught, 'not as the scribes'. That is an important clue. How did they teach? From Mark's gospel we would have to conclude that much of their teaching was concerned with fine points of interpretation of the Law. And from the rest of the gospel we conclude that Jesus' teaching must have focused on central themes like God's compassion.

In Mark and elsewhere we find Jesus often teaching with a directness which drew on common life experience rather than derivatively by interpreting scripture. This had the effect of shifting the power base of knowledge from the experts (in scripture, scribes) to the common people, who all knew about common life experience. It was a different way of doing theology, which democratised the process. This may have been in Mark's mind. From the perspective of the New Testament as a whole it makes a lot of sense.¹

Mark interrupts our thought by the account of the exorcism. I don't think Mark means us to see the synagogue as a gathering place for demons and the demonic. Rather Jesus is, if you like, claiming the space and belonging to it. The confrontation is described simply but powerfully. 'What are you doing here?' The demon said.. It is desperately confrontative, because the demon recognised that Jesus could destroy its power. 'The holy one of God' says what it means. It certainly recalls all that was said of Jesus at his baptism and must mean something similar to 'the Son of God' which we find

¹<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MkEpiphany4.htm>

on the lips of other demons. Through it Jesus becomes a way of defining holiness – worth remembering!²

Jesus silences the demon and demands he depart. The demon does so, but not without yelling at the top of his voice. The exorcism is achieved. The demoniac has been liberated. Such an encounter feels so strange in our culture, that we may want to avoid it altogether. It is then very hard to appreciate Mark who has made such encounters so central.. However we understand exorcisms, those reported from the ancient world or from present day cultures unlike our own, something real is happening here.

People are being set free.

That is the important thing, liberation, setting people free. This is an essential component of the "good news" of God's reign. It is a demonstration of what is meant when John predicts that Jesus will baptise with the Spirit. For Mark exorcising unclean spirits is a primary function of the Holy Spirit and the key element one should recognise in what Jesus is doing.. setting people free to be who God has created them to be.

We all face our own Demons, and wildness, or destructive urges. Often we will face the everyday Demons of jealousy, greed, slough, avarice, gluttony... all this wildness, out of balance, this is what keeps us from ourselves, from God, and from each other. Many of us will also face mental illness at some point in our lives. When we do, we need both prayer and professional help.

There is also in some, the personification of evil. In such circumstances our task is to lean heavily on Jesus, to call full support of others to cast out. To provide a safe place, a synagogue and call on Jesus for help. Always we seek help and support from professionals, and from Christ himself.

Personally, our task is to come home to where we are loved and accepted.

So, as we begin the year, I hope to provide a safe place where we can face our madness, release our fears, turn to God again and again and open ourselves to God's authority and healing presence within this Cathedral community.

² William Loader <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MkEpiphany4.htm>

Jesus teaching is the kind of teaching which liberates, which discerns the demonic powers which oppress people and seeks to bring about new beginnings.

The central thing is enabling people to be how God made them to be. That must involve addressing powers and gods that enslave.

We need to create the space, the 'synagogue', where our madness can come face to face with the holiness of Jesus. That also means coming to terms with our own madness

Where the Wild Things Are, by Maurice Sendak,

(tells of a little boy who acts up and is sent to his room from which his imagination takes him to romp in the land of the Wild Things, who make him their king. It is fun for a while, but then he decides to go home where he is known and loved. The Wild Things try to persuade him to stay, but he goes back to his room and finds his supper laid out for him "and it is still warm.")

There is a sense of healing and coming home that is possible when we walk away from our demons. . Walk towards Love.

Susanna