

January 31, 2021 (Mark 1: 21-28)

Today's Gospel reading from Mark introduces us to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. It begins in Capernaum, a town on the north side of Lake Galilee. It is a Sabbath and Jesus enters the local Synagogue. Jesus teaches as one with authority, not as the Scribes, and then there is an exorcism of a demon – a most unsettling interaction. The people are left in wonder and awe. Who is this man, Jesus of Nazareth?

It is the question this Gospel of Mark intends to answer. As Mark is the controlling Gospel for Year B of the lectionary, I hope you will bear with me as I note a few features of this Gospel that help us understand the context of this passage and more to come.

Mark was written around 60 A.D. – a generation after the Resurrection, and maybe 4 or 5 years before the Israel-Roman War which lasted from 66-70 and resulted in the total defeat of Israel and the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple – really the end of Israel as a political entity for almost 1900 years. Politics were as much in daily conversation then as now.

There were stories of Jesus circulating which portrayed him as a heavenly being who sort of floated above the pain and problems of humanity – Elijah returned as a heavenly being; or, like the Greeks, a supernatural hero. In other words, the story of Jesus is about glory – of God and of us in a new reality.

On the contrary, some were now parsing Jesus' teaching, much like the Scribes, and forgetting the One who spoke them.

There were many who felt the world was ending – that the Second Coming was imminent.

There are also peculiarities about Mark's writing:

He's in a hurry! In the Greek there is hardly any punctuation. Stories are connected with the words "immediately, next," and the Greek word *Kai* – *and* - is everywhere. Why was Mark in such a rush?

We should also salute Mark for composing the first Christian 'Gospel'. Not just a bunch of sayings or stories; not just a meditation on Jesus' divinity. But a **NARRATIVE, A STORY THAT INTERTWINES HISTORY AND THEOLOGY** – and invites us into the narrative.

Then there is the Messianic Secret. Jesus only reveals who he is to the disciples – and they are thick as bricks when it comes to ‘getting it.’

And Israel – did Jesus repudiate parts of Judaism or fulfill the promise?

We owe Mark deep appreciation for rooting Jesus in the history of his time and place – and within that history, asking us – as Jesus asked the 12 – **Who do you say that I am?**

If you are still with me, ON TO THE TEXT!

The people marvelled that Jesus spoke with authority and not as the Scribes. AUTHORITY! What’s happening here?

The ‘Scribal Tradition’ included the Doctors of the Law in Jerusalem, but also those designated to lead Synagogue prayers, Psalms and teaching. Teaching was based on Torah and the Prophets – what Moses or Isaiah, for example, said and what it means. The implication is that this how you must act.

Jesus’ authority meant that he lifted up those texts of law and prophecy and brought them home – made them relevant, made them alive. God’s Old Words became new, eliciting a response. There was life, hope, energy, relevance – people felt something new was happening – they wanted more.

But then, there was an interruption – a man with a demon spoke out. Normally, a person so possessed would not be allowed in the synagogue – but here he was. And it seems it was not the man who spoke but the demon itself: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth, have you come to destroy us?”

Jesus did not go into a made for TV production, he rather rebuked the demon and said, “Be silent and come out of him”. There was a convulsing within the man, and the demon came out. And again the people were amazed. Who is this man Jesus?

Here we hit a wall. If we start talking to our neighbours about demons, I’m sure the conversation will be brief. Of all the questions I have been asked by parishioners over the years, most are on this topic of evil spirits and exorcisms in the Bible.

When I was in Malawi, there was never a problem – people knew about evil, about possession, about village Shamans who healed body and soul with incantations and potions. Malawians greater question was why these healings weren't happening in the Church as they once did in that Synagogue?

And we today grapple with this problem of evil. Secular society cannot accept supernatural answers to the question. But we in the Church struggle: How can a loving God, the God of Grace and Compassion revealed fully in Jesus, how can this God allow evil to reign upon the earth?

Like many in my generation, trained in somewhat liberal Theological traditions, evil was seen basically as the lack of good. It was our job to promote the good. The good of God in Jesus – the comfort of the Holy Spirit in our distress – social justice - and leave the ultimate problem of evil to God.

I have a Japanese-Canadian friend, a Christian. She told me about Nagasaki before 1945. It was the centre of the small Christian community in Japan. It had a fine cathedral. When the atomic bomb exploded over Nagasaki, its epi-centre was right over the cathedral. “WHY”, she asked, “would a Christian nation choose the only Christian city to explode this monstrosity?” I have no answer and I salute her in her Christian journey as she holds in her heart this painful question.

And you and I, we too have these WHY questions: Why, O God?

We may well think ahead to a day in Calvary when even Jesus asked, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The truth, of course, is that Jesus was not forsaken. Jesus is risen, alive, with us. But in the pain and terror of the Cross, even Jesus wondered. Why?

When I started my own journey with a spiritual director in the Jesuit tradition, there came the time when I had to confront the question of evil. The hardest part was to accept the reality of supernatural evil. There is that power in the world which opposes the will of God.

That power of evil becomes more intense as you endeavour to be a disciple. You realize there is opposition – it can become very real – and frightening - at times.

Mark wrote his Gospel at a time when illness and misfortune were seen as demonic possession. So the lepers, the lame, the mentally ill were separated and condemned.

It was into the very face of this injustice – with these very people - that Jesus walked – to heal, encourage, bless – stand up and walk, you are free – follow me.

As Mark introduces Jesus of Nazareth to us today, he wants us to know this:

Listen to what Jesus says – these are the words of life – make them contemporary – live them.

Watch what Jesus does – we too must face the power of evil and bear the consequences – the Cross, the untimely and violent deaths of Stephen, Peter and Paul for example.

And the secret is out – God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself – but it takes faith to live this truth.

So, no, I do not go to the hospital with my exorcism kit. And I am very suspicious of the holy television stars who produce a miracle a minute on stage.

There is truth in Paul's assertion that we battle not against flesh and blood but the elementary powers of the universe.

I also warn that you can go a bit crazy trying to sort it all out. The noted historian R G Collingwood was once asked, "What is history?" He replied – after a pause – "history is just one damn thing after another!"

So be it – so keep close to Jesus in faith – the one who lived our life has defeated death and evil – they are powerful but will not conquer.

And let us walk where Jesus walked. We will never convince the sceptics, but we will seek out the least and last and lost – that they should never feel excluded from God's love in Jesus. We are or were all lost sheep.

The one thing that Mark gave us which we also must do: **we cannot separate what Jesus said and did from who Jesus is.**

We live this truth at the Lord's Table. The Word and the Person together – so we hear, touch, sense the aroma, taste and see that the Lord is good. Amen.