

Mark 1:21-28

21 They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 and he cried out, "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." 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." 28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

UNCLEAN SPIRIT

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

This morning we are reading from the opening pages of the book of Mark, which is commonly thought to be the first of the gospels to be written. Authorship of this book is attributed to John Mark, a young man who we learn about in the book of Acts as a cousin of Barnabas who accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey up to Galatia.

John Mark was also quite close with Peter, and in fact Peter refers to him as his son, though likely this more a term of endearment than literal fact. John Mark is also believed to be the young man in the Garden of Gethsemane during Jesus' betrayal. In this scene, the soldiers appeared, Judas gave his kiss of betrayal and all of a sudden there was a flash of a sword and things got very chaotic. In the midst of this was a young man who was seized in the commotion, but wriggled out of his robe and fled into the night naked. This is our author, and it's little wonder that he left his name out as he recounted this particular episode.

Mark's writing style reflects his desperate flight from the soldiers in Gethsemane; it's brisk, breathless and chaotic. Based on its frequency, Mark's favourite word must be εὐθέως (eutheos) which means at once, or immediately, though for the sake of variety we see different words used in our English translations.

In Mark's gospel we are first introduced to Jesus at the river Jordan. John pushed him under the water and when Jesus arose *immediately* the heavens were torn open and God spoke.

Immediately after that the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness where he was tempted. Upon his return Jesus called to Simon and Andrew who *immediately* dropped their nets to follow this man from Galilee. Just then, Jesus spotted James and John, and *immediately* he called them too. All of this is packed into the first page of Mark.

There isn't a lot of Jesus' teachings in Mark's gospel as compared to the others; there's not a lot of dialogue. Mark writes as though he's creating a script for an action movie – fast paced, filled with

'edge of your seat' tension and conflict, intrigue, dramatic special effects, a secret that the readers understand but the characters do not, and more than a few witty one-liners.

We join in this story as Jesus was teaching in the synagogue in the seaside town of Capernaum. Aside from the baptism, which would have gotten more than a few people talking about him, this was Jesus' first public action.

He was teaching, and more than teaching – he was teaching as one with authority, not as one of the scribes. The text doesn't really explain what that means, teaching with authority, but I'm supposing that Jesus was teaching in his own words.

The scribes would have quoted scripture and then debated the meaning. They would use phrases like 'You have heard it said,' and 'As it is written.' Jesus, on the other hand, phrased much of his teaching in the first person – 'I say to you.'

This authority is quite important to Mark. Authority seems to be the characteristic that he emphasises over and over again in his first chapter.

The voice from heaven identified Jesus as the son of the One God. Authority.

When Jesus was sent into the wilderness to contend with Satan he was waited on by angels. Authority.

Jesus called Simon and Andrew, then James and John - the sons of thunder – and they immediately dropped what they were doing and followed him. Authority.

Next Jesus was in the synagogue teaching with authority. In the middle of his teaching he commanded an impure spirit out of a man with a word to which people responded 'Look at the authority this Jesus has!'

Because this morning's reading opens with a declaration of Jesus' authority and also closes with the same message, while being embedded within a larger chapter also about authority, it would be quite easy to just focus on the authority of Jesus.

It's a simple message really – here's the book of Mark summarized to today's reading.

Jesus is the Son of God.

Jesus has authority over Satan, and the angels.

Jesus has authority over human beings.

Jesus has authority over unclean spirits.

This may have been new knowledge to the people in Rome that Mark was writing to, but it's not new to us. We already know that Jesus is the name to which every knee shall bow.

What we aren't so familiar with, however, are the spiritual powers that have been mentioned: Satan, angels, and unclean spirits. In our modern world we don't really know what to make of all this. It's easier to just talk about authority and leave the details out of it.

The idea of casting out demons leaves many of us feeling just a little uncomfortable; while we believe in God, we are more unsure about unclean spirits – that sounds a little Pentecostal – kind of weird. Many of us would consider that we have outgrown spirits such as this, after all, didn't the ancients just call everything that they didn't understand a spirit? Hasn't our knowledge replaced the need for spirits?

In the ancient worldview everything earthly had a heavenly counterpart, and everything heavenly had an earthly counterpart. As above, so below. This is a way of saying that every material reality has a spiritual dimension, and every spiritual reality has physical consequences. There is nothing that does not consist of the both visible and the invisible.

For all intents and purposes, the physical and the spiritual are inextricably linked, and one cannot be divorced from the other. What this means is that our modern desire to only deal with the physical and declare that the spiritual does not exist is both foolish and arrogant. In fact, we put ourselves at a great disadvantage when we do so.

The way many people interpret the bible's exorcism stories is to claim that the ancients had a very deficient concept of mental illness and disease, so whatever they didn't understand they blamed on evil spirits.

Let's follow this line of thought. In Mark's gospel there are four exorcisms. The unclean man in the synagogue that we read about this morning; Legion, the man in the graveyard with many demons; the Gentile woman whose child was possessed and who persisted with Jesus saying 'even the dogs get the crumbs under the table;' and finally the boy whose demon caused him to convulse and fall down.

The story of Gentile woman doesn't give us any information about the daughter who was possessed. She isn't present in the story, Jesus never confronts the demon, he merely assured the mother that the child would be well. It's not really a story about possession as it is about persistent faith, so let's disregard that one.

This leaves us with the man with the unclean spirit, Legion with many voices in his head, and the boy with convulsions. In our reason based culture we like to explain things, so let's do just that, beginning at the end.

The boy who had convulsions that made him collapse and fall into the fire and into the water sounds a lot like someone with epilepsy, or something similar, doesn't it? His possession appears to us to be more of a physical ailment than a spiritual one. The boy had a disease.

In the case of our next exorcism we have Legion who was filled with spirits – so many that when Jesus drove them out they went into a herd of 2000 pigs. That's a lot of voices in one head. Many voices in

one person might be diagnosed as schizophrenia, manic depression (or bi-polar syndrome it's called today), or psychosis. Add to this the symbolism of this man living among the tombs – literally experiencing a state of living death, then we could assume that this man was suffering from some form of mental illness, not demon possession.

This brings us to the man with the impure spirit. We aren't given much information in his case, we are just told that he has an impure spirit. This one, perhaps, has a spiritual problem. One out of the three.

Of the three exorcism subjects one was suffering from a physical illness, one a mental illness, and the third a spiritual illness. They exhibited pathologies of body, mind, and spirit. Each one of them were healed by Jesus. He didn't need to differentiate between a corruption of the body or corruption of the spirit because illnesses of the body, of the mind, and of the spirit all have a common spiritual root.

The result of sin was the introduction of death, disease, and decay into the world. Creation is fallen, and humanity is no longer in harmony with God, with the environment, each other, and even ourselves. Sin is the corrupting power in the world.

Now, although it is true that sin is at the root of all our troubles, don't jump to the conclusion that whatever you might be suffering from is a result of doing something wrong. Diseases don't discriminate, they can happen at any time to any person.

But, the fact remains that once sin was let loose in the world it has wreaked destruction and left a wake of broken bodies, broken minds, and broken spirits.

The good news is that we have a saviour who came specifically to set us free from sin. Not merely in some abstract sense of forgiveness, but in the very real sense of making people whole again. When we see Jesus forgiving people he not only takes away the burden of sin but he also removes the effects of sin – the broken bodies, broken minds, and broken spirits.

Does this mean that we can all stop going to see our doctors and instead just perform exorcisms on each other? Of course not. God has blessed us with minds and reason and expects us to use them. We live in a time in which medical science can do amazing things – it would be foolish to not use such a resource.

What we are much more likely to do is go to the other extreme. We focus on treating our problems only on a physical level while ignoring the spiritual, and then we wonder why we don't see the results that we hoped for. This is especially true when treating mental health issues.

Why do some people recover quickly while others mangle? Doctors talk about the importance of attitude and a positive outlook – of having something to live for, as being key factors in recovery. That is spiritual health. When we deny or ignore the fact that we are both physical and spiritual beings we do ourselves a great disservice; we sabotage ourselves and we rob ourselves of a powerful source of healing.

When things break or do not work correctly we consult the owner's manual, or we call the manufacturer. It should be exactly the same with us. When we experience distress or disease in body, mind, or spirit, we need to contact our manufacturer.

Prayer is how we do this; prayer is how we consult with our maker when things are not running properly. Do you have a spirit of envy or jealousy? Pray about it and get it out. Gather one or two close friends and pray together.

When your doctor gives you bad news, pray. I told you a week or two ago about my friend who was healed through prayer. It doesn't happen all the time, and I don't know why, but it does happen.

Prayer is not weird or spooky, nor is it an act of desperation. Prayer is a rational, intentional seeking of God, God's grace, and God's healing power. Prayer is never out of place, and prayer is never wasted.

Jesus pointed out the importance of prayer when his disciples tried and failed to cast the spirit out of the boy suffering convulsions. Prayer is power.

Regardless of what you may believe about exorcisms, Jesus considered it a vital part of his healing ministry, and the attention Jesus paid to the spirits reinforces to us that we don't merely inhabit a physical world. There is a spiritual reality that permeates all of creation that affects us in ways we aren't always aware of. Though we often don't perceive the spirits that affect us, the Holy One of God does, and has authority over all of them.