

## **Mark 1:21-45 ~ Jesus' victory over the demonic** <sup>1</sup>

Today's reading comes from very early in Mark's Gospel. Previously we hear how John the Baptist comes to prepare the way for a powerful one who follows. He will immerse God's people not just in water but in the very Spirit of God.

Jesus then arrives on the scene. He is baptised by John, anointed by the Holy Spirit of God,<sup>2</sup> then "immediately driven into the wilderness where he is tested by Satan".<sup>3</sup>

Next Jesus arrives in Galilee proclaiming the time has come for the rule of God to be under way. People need to change their thinking! Turn and believe in the "good news"!<sup>4</sup>

Mark sees this proclamation very much in terms of a confrontation with demonic powers that hold humanity in their grip. For Mark, Jesus' mission is a struggle to the death to set us free from bondage to "the strong man", as he later puts it.<sup>5</sup> The "good news" is, Jesus wins this struggle.

So for Mark, a decisive time has come.<sup>6</sup> There is a sense of urgency as both God's judgement as well as deliverance from evil, approaches. We are called to embrace this "good news" in order to be set free and become part of God's liberating work as followers of Jesus the anointed one.

And so, before entering upon his messianic mission, Jesus calls his first disciples to constitute this new humanity; and he calls them not from the

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<sup>1</sup> This theme and some of the text that follows is lifted from Fr. Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom ~ A theological reading of Mark's Gospel*, Liturgical press, Collegeville Minnesota, 2008. Pg.44 f.f. Quotes are not shown here.

<sup>2</sup> Mk.1:9-11.

<sup>3</sup> Mk.1:12-13.

<sup>4</sup> Mk.1:14-15.

<sup>5</sup> Mk.3:27.

<sup>6</sup> "The time is fulfilled". Mk.1:15.

higher echelons of his society but from peasant fishermen whose chief qualification seems to be that they are prepared simply to follow him when he says so.<sup>7</sup>

Next we see Jesus in a sequence scenes located in or around the lakeside town of Capernaum – the home town of Peter, the likely source of this “good news”, and the town which was to become Jesus’ northern base.

Running right through to verse 38 of the first chapter, everything takes place within a single rather long day which Mark seems to present as typical of the ministry now getting underway.

As a good Jew, Jesus goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath. As was the custom he would have been invited as a visitor to speak. It’s ironic that throughout his good news story Mark presents Jesus as a teacher but, apart for “proclaiming the Kingdom”, gives us very little of the content of what is said. This instance is no exception. It could well have been the same interpretation of Isaiah which Luke records Jesus broad-siding his home synagogue with in Nazareth as he began his mission.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever was said, it had high impact. We are told twice that it left his hearers “astounded”: the word used is a compound of the word for “strike” or “smite”.

So the key thing that Mark is concerned for us to get here, is not the detail of what Jesus said, but that people were gob-smacked at the way in which he said it. He didn’t claim, “teacher so and so said this, and teacher such and such said that”. Rather, in keeping with his claims to embody the reign of God in his person, he “speaks with authority” (as Mark

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<sup>7</sup> Mk.1:16-20.

<sup>8</sup> Lk.4:16-30.

recounts the people saying<sup>9</sup>). That is, Jesus quotes himself.

Mark then gives a typical reaction to what happens when God's word is spoken into a situation: "immediately", the forces of evil recognise Jesus and his message as a threat to the grip they have upon humanity. In this case the powers manifest themselves in a man within the congregation.

Presumably this demon-possessed man had sat through Sabbaths of scribal teaching many times and had been left unmoved. As soon as Jesus appears on the scene and begins to teach, the demon senses the threat to the control it has and calls out demanding to know what Jesus' intention is: "what have you to do with us Jesus of Nazareth?! I know who you are! The Holy one of God!!"<sup>10</sup>

With a word, Jesus commands the spirit to be quiet and leave the man. The man convulses and shrieks, and the spirit goes. Mark presents this in an almost matter of fact way. There is no magic formula involved – Jesus simply speaks with God's authority and it happens.

Mark seems to see a deep irony here, as he cuts to the reaction of the synagogue; for whilst the forces of evil very readily recognise a word of liberating power, those who concern themselves with studying God's word are left bewildered, even if amazed. Disturbingly, Mark presents this pattern throughout his Gospel where even the disciples mostly don't seem to get it. One can't help but see parallels to how many commentators and preachers approach the bible today where the plain sense of scripture is lost in a hall of interpretive mirrors.

Be that as it may, it seems clearly apparent that conflict with a blinded and moribund religious system and a lost and despairing society, was

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<sup>9</sup> Mk.1:27.

<sup>10</sup> Mk.1:24.

very much a reality in Jesus' mission of liberation and so equally at the forefront of Mark's telling of the good news. It is also apparent that this sets up a very difficult and uncomfortable dynamic at the heart of the spirituality Jesus modelled.

And here's the rub:

As we commit ourselves, as God's people in this place, to the task of announcing through word and deed God's word of liberation within our society, we should expect conflict.

As with the people of Jesus' day, people around us may well have a felt need for a spirituality of comfort rather than challenge, and this is entirely understandable given the many pressures in which we live.

Yet, whatever people's *felt* needs, their *real* need is to be set free from all that enslaves them and keeps them from entering into the presence of God's blessing. Their *real* need is to turn away from their wilful ways and follow Jesus, the one alone who has power to deliver us from ourselves to become ourselves.

People may recognise this when they hear it – they may not. But one thing is for sure: such a proclamation won't come without *confrontation*, without *convulsion*, and it will be *disturbing* before it brings *healing* and *release*.

Regardless of how people may or may not respond, we don't have to be ashamed of the words of Jesus, nor, by extension, the words of scripture, for they are the words that bring freedom from bondage, order from chaos, certainty from disarray. In a society such as ours which has lost its moral compass and is living with the results, we can have confidence that words like these are truly "good news".