

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 4 Year B 2018

One of the classic and near universal techniques of story-telling is the setting up of opposites against each other; opposing figures which add tension and drama. Almost any novel, story or movie will have at work within them something of this play of opposites, often the basic dichotomy of good and bad, good and evil. This technique is at work in Gospel as well. Still at the start of Mark's Gospel and still in the first chapter, we Jesus emerge as a teacher with *authority* and whose words and reputation earn him respect and admiration. The authority with which he proclaims the good news of the kingdom places him in *contrast* - in distinction - to the Scribes.

We are somewhat used to that play of contrast: Jesus up and against the Scribes, and in other gospels the Pharisees as well - the legalistic guardians of Israel's law. Their authority the authority of tradition and the status quo. But against *their* claims to authority we hear of the crowd's own interpretation of Jesus' authority: '*here is a teaching that is new.*' From the Gospel last week, we heard the content of Jesus preaching is simply, *the time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent.* But this is enough for the people to begin to turn - to reject - the hollowness of Scribes' preaching and to invest some hope in the newness of Christ's preaching.

But in the Gospel placed before us today there is another play of contrasts at work. Jesus is held up to us not only in contrast to the Scribes but also the 'unclean spirits'. It is part of the particular world view that the gospel writer Mark inhabits that sees him put Jesus - more than the other Gospel writers - in the role of exorcist. Mark's world is a world inhabited by demons and evil forces. Now, in our post-modern, rationalist, enlightenment perspective we all too quickly dismiss the idea of a world inhabited by demons or unclean spirits as strange, quaint or simply misguided and wrong. But in being too quick to dismiss his world view we risk dismissing the entire Gospel and the heart of the message here. What the evangelist offers us here is too important to dismiss just because the world he describes and the language he uses is too strange and unfamiliar.

Dismissing Mark's world view as old-fashioned silliness really is the luxury of our comfortable, secure, middle-class perspective. Perhaps we need to remind ourselves of the reach and destruction of evil, countless and monstrous evils at work in our world not readily understood or so easily dismissed. In seeing a world inhabited by demons, Mark reminds us there *are* dark forces beyond our understanding that are real and dangerous. So, rather than skipping over these bits in the gospel, we need to try harder to understand what they say to us. At its heart, Jesus' preaching of the kingdom along with his exorcisms, seeks to displace the existing kingdom, the rule - the opposing rule - of Satan. The way the evangelist sees it, the world has fallen out of the hands of God and fallen captive to the rule of Satan. The kingdom of God, then, is in part about *breaking free* from that captive rule. God's rule, God's kingdom, then, is not something established in neutral ground, not on a '*terra nullius*'. God's kingdom has to reclaim *hostile* territory. As the Gospel of Mark unfolds, the story we are being told is the story of a battle, of a cosmic struggle! But as we move through the Gospel, we see Christ taking victory after victory.

So, Jesus doesn't just *proclaim* the good news of the kingdom. He actually enacts it. And so, as Mark tells us of exorcisms and healings and even control over destructive natural forces such as the storm on the lake, are all his way of saying that *God's rule is gaining foothold in our world*. While the fulfilment and completion of that struggle is still a way off, it is clear that we are meant to understand that the rule of Satan is over. And God's way and God's vision for human kind is reaching out to men and women here and now.

The exorcism we hear of today, then, really just *physically* shows Jesus' proclamation of the rule of God taking hold, becoming real and truly breaking into this world. It heightens that sense of the contrast between Jesus and the unclean spirits *and* at the same time the contrast between Jesus and the scribes. And in this we are meant to understand the connection between the expulsion of demons and Jesus' teaching. *Both* are signs of the in-breaking of God's rule; both, in a sense are exorcisms because they both – the expulsion the unclean spirit and his teaching - are exercises of liberation: they both free men and women from what holds human beings captive.

Now, the scene as described for us today emphasizes the connection between teaching and exorcism by placing the exorcism itself *in* the synagogue, the place of formal teaching with Judaism. Now, we might presume the demon-possessed individual had sat through countless Sabbaths of scribal teaching and been left *unmoved*. The words of the Scribes had been *ineffective* to change, to heal, to liberate. But as soon as Jesus appears on the scene and begins to teach, the unclean spirit recognizes the threat of Jesus' words to the demon's control: '*what is there between us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?*' A question to which the implied answer is: *YES! Yes indeed!* Jesus *has* come destroy his power, his control, his rule over this man's life. That the demon leaves with convulsions and a loud cry just shows its destructive intent. And its cry is both an acknowledgment of defeat and a protest that its dark rule over this person's life has come to an end. No wonder, we are told, the people standing about are '*astonished*.'

I wonder if *that* is our response to the work of God in our lives? Is there a sense of astonishment, wonder, when the liberating power of Christ breaks through into our life and into our world? Because it should! The gospel shows that the presence and preaching of Jesus changes lives, and dramatically so. The gospel wants us to understand that Christ is claiming us for God's kingdom. There is a war going on as Christ claims us from the kingdom of darkness for his kingdom of light. There is a real struggle going on. So often our faith is more akin to light entertainment. But the encounter with Christ is not to leave us unmoved. It is to shake us to the very depth of our beings.

The Gospel portion today also stands as a powerful warning against looking in the wrong direction and in the wrong places for freedom, happiness and fulfilment. There is no shortage of options in our world of alluring courses, books programmes, products and lifestyles promising us all manner of wonderful things. But Christ and Christ alone will free us! We have *to trust* that this is true. Anything else is short change. We have to trust Christ enough for him to rule in us. We have to trust him enough to change us. And as he changes us, bit by bit - little victory after little victory - we become the agents

to build God's kingdom in the world around us. Ultimately, we need to decide which kingdom we will fight for. Amen.