



## **Unclean Spirits**

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Year B, Epiphany 4

Deut 18:15-20; Mark 1-21-28

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When I first read the opening verses of the Gospel reading set for today, the 4th Sunday of the 5 Sundays of Epiphany this year, It felt familiar and reassuring. Jesus and his new friends went to church because it was a holy day.

Well, they went to the synagogue in Capernaum, on the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. A bit like us, coming to church because it is Sunday. And, a bit like us, it seems those who were gathered - in the forecourt of the synagogue - enjoyed the authoritative teaching he offered. " He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." It's always great when you listen to someone who knows what they are talking about and you can follow what they are saying.

So here we have it, Mark's Gospel. The first of the written 'narrative' gospels, the first continuous story, the foundational text that the other gospel writers make good use of as they record their versions of the story that gathered around Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary and Joseph the carpenter - cousin of John the baptiser. Mark is writing around 70 CE, a ghastly time for the Jewish people who a few years earlier had revolted against Roman rule and were now paying the consequences as the Roman legions re-conquered Jerusalem. Mark is looking back and offering reassurance to the emerging Christian community that Jesus really was someone in whose story they can have confidence; someone who was linked with their Jewish hopes and expectations - a prophet raised up from amongst themselves. (Deut 18: 15)

Epiphany, is the season when we consider what we know about Jesus. In its earliest stage it was the festival celebrating his baptism, then slid, in the Western church, to celebrating the arrival of the Magi. Today, in our liturgical calendar, we take the opportunity to explore and wonder if there is anything else we can discover about him in our time, that adds to his significance for us as a prophet of wisdom: a 'goddling' person, a justice seeker, a healer. It's the time in the calendar when we wonder what new insights we can glimpse into this person who it

seems still has the capacity to influence our lives over 2000 years after he lived albeit in times very different from our own.

*Who was this man and why are we still coming to church and talking about him?*

Well, he is an artisan's son. Raised in Nazareth, a follower of his cousin John the Baptist who called people to repent for the structural wrongs of their age, (remember they are under Roman rule) who calls them to turn back to the fundamental values of their covenant with God, and to remember who they are as a people. As the story goes, Jesus was baptised by his cousin John in the River Jordan and, in this event, was identified as a person with even more power and authority to bring about change than John himself. The story says that God's voice was heard to declare "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Again echoing the First Testament, Isaiah this time. Then Jesus goes off into the wilderness from where John came. Forty days later, John was arrested, by Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, and ruler of Galilee, triggering the beginning of Jesus public ministry. Jesus emerges from the wilderness, and invites four fishermen to follow him and they head to Capernaum. Then Because it was the Sabbath they go to the Synagogue - and this is where we pick up the story today.

Here, right at the outset of the story, Jesus engages the public with his take on the issues of the day and situations that would be mark his ongoing ministry. We find him confronting unclean spirits or denouncing evil, and the proclaiming in words and actions of the good news of the coming kingdom of God.

We don't know what Jesus taught in this first event, at the interface of religious and political authorities in the forecourt, but we can imagine, as Mark describes for us in symbolic terms the instance Jesus engages authoritatively with the systems that cause illness, social breakdown. (as cousin John would have done)

There was something in Jesus teaching in this first public encounter, in the forecourt of the synagogue, that enabled the people to understand what he, Jesus, was about.

*We are told he called an 'unclean spirit' out of a man.*

In this instance Jesus embodies resistance to the demonic - resistance to evil - resistance to all that that dehumanises, isolates, marginalises.

It was no wonder they were excited, intrigued, a bit puzzled and perhaps afraid!

We know today, as the people who were Mark's audience knew, stories such as this were not literally about the 'healing' of one 'demon

possessed' man. That would not have been very note worthy any way as there were lots of accredited healers casting out demons - Jesus was unlikely to have been one of them. No wonder they started talking about him - 'his fame began to spread...' despite Jesus trying to command silence

Exorcism was a concern for the early church, it was not rare. As Walter Wink, theologian and writer on spirituality and politics, says "it was the indispensable pre-requisite for getting a "new mind" ..."cleansing the mind of misinformation that enslaves people." As Amanda spoke of last week - creating the opportunity for metanoia.

We too, often need to 'clear our mind' to create the circumstances where we can see something from a different point of view. Perhaps that is one of the reasons we are still cogitating on the stories and insights about Jesus that have developed over the millennia.

We can so easily put ourselves in the story! We could be harbouring an 'unclean spirit' though these days we dont usually speak about confusion and misapprehension this way.

Unlike the people of Jesus day, many of whom readily accepted the presence of evil, demonic forces, inhabiting people, in mainstream Christian theology, we don't 'personalise' evil this way - understand 'evil as an entity'. (Although exorcism to cast out an evil spirit is still practised in some threads of present day Christianity, it is rare.) It is more likely we talk about behaviours as evil, as wrong, as crimes against humanity. And most of us can think of some behaviours and actions usually on a global or national scale that we would want to label this way. When these behaviours, especially from a significant power base, coalesce they become 'systems' that need to be called out, to be transformed. We can name a number of places in our world today where we can name such behaviours - Gaza/Israel, Ukraine/Russia, mega-wealth accumulation at the expense of the planet for example.

But, bringing the metaphor closer to home, to our personal, interpersonal and community arenas, then most of us find ourselves silent colluders in the status quo which holds in place systems of racism, homophobia, sexism, hunger, homelessness and other markers of a society that is still far from materialising the 'kingdom, or kin-dom of God'.

Jesus calls these unclean spirits out. They come but not without protest. Many of us are possessed by selfish greed, avarice, personal aggrandisement, a sense of superiority or entitlement. Most of us dont give them up without a fuss, without protest either. To give them up will require a change in our life priorities.

I wonder if this story can help us to see this, to own this?

Will it encourage us to 'repent' to 'turn again' toward the vision of the 'kin-dom' of God Jesus was proclaiming and struggling for, and to begin to live as though it were here?

We might well be afraid. The changes required will be significant if we are to 'give up' the dehumanising systems that hold us enthralled and often make life good for us but not so good for others and indeed precarious for future generations. But the story of God's good news, and the example of Jesus reassures us that we don't do it alone. We are called to work together to make the changes necessary, to work with the Spirit of God that is found in the positive creative energy for justice found among us.

*When we work together for good, for justice, we incarnate God. Or to use the words of Carter Heyward, feminist theologian, "to the extent our relationships encourage one another to be ourselves as fully, productively, and joyfully as possible, we are generating more mutuality -and it is good. We are godding"*

The spirits and attitudes that hold us back are called out. We are called to 'clear our mind' and to help others clear their mind too. We can do this for each other by **not** being silent when we see or hear damaging behaviours and attitudes, **nor** when we encounter systems that dehumanise, **or** when we are confronted by decisions that endanger the health of the planet that supports our life.

I think it is stories like this one, strange though it might seem on first reading, that call us back to the task of 'godding' - working with God - that keep us exploring the significance Jesus.

We have caught a vision of how the world could be, we want to be a part of it. We want our vision to become a reality for everyone. So no matter what our belief framework is, how firm our faith is, how many questions we have, it is the vision that emerges from the gospels and the opportunity to wonder at it and to explore in the company of others how bring it to realisation, that keeps us coming to church.

*There is much work to be done if the hungry are to be fed, the homeless housed, the imprisoned set free, the thirsty given water, those living with violence shown the way to peace with justice and love: if we are all to live with compassion and kindness in an earth that is flourishing.*