



Susan Adams
What holds us back?

Helder Camera. *The desert is fertile.* p 14

Mark 1:21-28

Epiphany 4

31 January 2021

I once read a book that began its opening chapter with a rape scene. It was awful but I couldn't stop reading till I found out what happened to the both the victim and the perpetrator.

All good story tellers know how important it is to hook your reader right at the beginning.

The writer of the book we have come to know as Mark's gospel clearly knows this too. Right from the beginning of Chapter one, 21 verses back, he has - without embellishment - presented Jesus in stark and somewhat shocking terms. And now, in today's reading he offers us Jesus, in the middle of a stoush on the Sabbath, in the synagogue at Capernaum where he is offending protocols. He has encroached on the privileges of the scribes and is teaching in the forecourt much to their dismay. The writer, who following common custom we will call Mark, has cracked on at quite a pace in setting up the character and purpose of Jesus: Jesus is a man with authority, he is unafraid to name and call out demons.

This is the first of the narrative gospels to be written and the way Mark shapes the story, Jesus' character and ministry, becomes important for the writers who follow. So we have Jesus, without the benefit of a virgin birth to testify to his uniqueness, baptised by John, the wild man in skins, in the river Jordan which marks the boundary between wilderness and freedom. As Jesus moved about the area of Galilee he persuaded four fishermen to follow him, and as it was the Sabbath they have gone to the synagogue. Immediately (Mark likes to get on with things) Jesus teaches with an authority that challenges that of the learned scribes, and then when challenged himself calls out demons. Exorcism was common in Jesus' day. Belief had it that when God was absent from a person a demon inhabited them: when goodness was absent, evil was present.

It is important for us to remember that although we are used to reading this story as a healing story, the exorcism of a troubled individual, for Mark the 'sickness' illustrated is not simply personal but rather illustrative of a social malaise within which we are implicated - that is how we have come to understand these stories in contemporary reading. When Jesus' teaching and the values illustrated by that teaching were challenged, Jesus faces into the challenge and names it for what it is.

It would be comforting for us to hear this story as the healing of a troubled man. But I don't think that is Mark's purpose. Mark is setting out for us his perspective on who this wandering teacher is and why he is important: he is prefiguring the rest of his gospel. He is giving us a glimpse of the Jesus who will name and challenge powers of oppression.

As we listen to this story of Jesus first public engagement we can notice some of the details that will be important as the book unfolds and along with it our insight into who the community came to understand Jesus to be. What can we know so far is:

He is itinerant

He is a leader others are willing to follow

He is a teacher who teaches with authority - setting out a vision

He claims space in the most sacred of places to teach with authority

His teaching has an impact - causes change

He is befriended, supported, by ordinary working people.

News about his authoritative teaching spread rapidly

In this little introductory piece of a bigger story, Jesus' teaching was unlikely dealing with details of the law - this - was the prerogative of the scribes and people would not have been amazed by that; nor was he focused on healing demon possessed individuals - there was plenty of that going on too, so they would not have been amazed by that either. *We can only speculate on what Mark wants us to understand was going on:* Jesus teaches the good news of God's activity amongst the peoples of the world, then sets free the man oppressed by a demon. This is good news indeed to a community persecuted and oppressed by both Roman and Jewish authorities.

We know, for Mark told us a few verses back, that the gap between earth and heaven has been closed, and that Jesus' ministry pleases God - good news indeed.

Mark's gospel has the hallmark of liberation. Liberation in many forms - not least the invitation to live 'the way' of the covenant-relationship with God, and the courage to address the powers and priorities that enslave and bind.

In our own time we are distracted from 'the way' of life that demonstrates the God/human covenant of right-relations between peoples and with the earth. Often our distraction is exacerbated by the very Christian faith to which we belong and finds satisfaction in arguing details of doctrine or biblical interpretation or liturgical correctness. These things can become for us 'demons' from which we need to be set free. Often we become enslaved to the acquiring of power, or wealth or influence or sometimes even the depth of our helplessness and unworthiness. Sometimes we are in danger of assuming our race or culture or gender or intellectual capacities are so superior that we can judge others by the way they measure up to our ideals. If we dare to listen to the wisdom of Mark we will hear in the challenge to Jesus, by the man possessed by evil, our very own voice : "What are you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" (Mk 1:24)

We, in our age of psychological understanding, may not give credence to demonic possession in the way communities did in Jesus' day or 30years later when Mark was writing, but we do know, and experience attests to, the benefit of naming what troubles us: facing into our fears and addictions. Naming such things destroys much of their power over us and gives us the opportunity to change how we live and relate.

So it is that we are naming many of the global 'troubles' that we are experiencing today. We who are of European descent are daring to name our racism, to admit that our neoliberal economic aspirations have led down an ever widening path of social inequality; to admit patriarchal social structures are still disadvantaging women and all who fall out of our hierarchical concerns.

We are a bit more reluctant to admit that putting humanity centre stage and prioritising human-beings over all other creatures and even the earth herself, is threatening our continued existence.

Most of these attitudes and aspects of who we are as individuals and as communities come to us through time as heirs of the collusion between imperialism and Christianity and their colonising and 'civilising' endeavours around the world. Many good things have come to us too through this collusion, and it would be unhelpfully

simplistic to deny that. But we know this, and this knowledge has blinded us for too long from facing up to and naming our self-destructive and earth damaging attitudes and behaviours.

When the enlightenment came upon us in the 18th century it compounded many of our blind spots, and added to them by offering us the lens of the individual through which to measure our worth and importance.

'I' became more important than 'we'; 'me' rather than 'us'. Today we are challenged by our circumstances to discover a new understanding of community, a new way to be 'we'. *We need to push back against individualism, and against moves to undermine community and global responsibility.*

I frightened myself when I realised what I had prepared to preach today.

But then I remembered Jesus' response to the challenge "have you come to destroy us?" was to silence and rebuke the challenge.

Jesus might well have said "yes I have"

In rebuking and silencing the challenge, Jesus set the person free to hear and respond to living and different way. .

So I feel compelled to ask as Epiphany draws to a close in this New Year of 2021 what are we going to do? Will we seek to be freed from the 'demons' that enslave us?

Each of us will need to give consideration as to who Jesus is for us; who we see when we read the stories about him, and what we understand the good news Mark writes about has to offer?

'The Way' of Jesus Mark presents from the outset of his gospel will undoubtedly destroy many of the marks of our lifestyle that we are currently enjoying. If we intend to leave an earth for our children and grandchildren to enjoy it must. Not only will we, together, have to reconsider the place of human beings amongst all creatures, but also what it is we need to enable the whole global family to live well and flourish, irrespective of race, gender, social location or intellect.

Each of us will need to consider our response to the challenge of Jesus teaching and decide if we are prepared to walk in 'the way' that we heard Jesus chose. That 'way' is marked by compassion and love, by access for all to the means of health and well-being, and by security of food and shelter which are basic needs for all humanity. However it needs us, together, to choose to call out what holds us back.