

Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> January, 2018 - 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany  
Year B  
Deuteronomy 18:15-20  
Psalm 111  
1 Corinthians 8:1-13  
Mark 1:21-28

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

“They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority...”

The age of the Gospels saw the world very differently from us. They believed in a spirit world that was every bit as real as the physical world... and what happened in that world of spirits, powerfully affected the lives of human beings... for good or ill. Thus misfortune and illness were caused by evil spirits - which were always on the prowl to do harm - managing to penetrate the human mind or body.

So in today's gospel, what we'd read as someone with epilepsy, is seen by the crowd in the synagogue that day as the action of an evil spirit. It's this demon within the afflicted man that calls out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” Far from being intimidated, Jesus takes on the imprisoning spirit. “Be silent and come out of him!” (25) And the spirit is defeated... and leaves.

It's what a polite church has come to read as a miracle of healing... but that's not how the crowd or the gospel readers saw it. Healing is certainly the fruit, but it's a consequence, a bi-product of the real action. What we're witnessing is nothing less than spiritual warfare... a miracle of deliverance... a triumph of human liberation. The evil spirit has been defeated by a stronger power and the afflicted man is now freed from its dark influence.

So... notice what the crowd is excited about... Authority!!!! In Jesus they encounter one who is stronger, more powerful than the demons.

It's hard for us to 'get it' but what we hear in the early Christian proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ is... excitement! "We're no longer at the mercy of these powerful dark forces seeking to ruin us", they say. Now we're in relationship with, under the patronage of, one who is greater, stronger than this evil. Jesus Christ, the Holy One of God, has authority over them - his light banishes their darkness.

This is not an issue of intellectualised belief... It's a matter of real life and death. Regardless of how we are currently afflicted or oppressed by the dark forces, in Jesus we encounter one who is empowered by God to set us free.

This is why the gospel is always received more openly and joyfully by oppressed people. While we sit here today in our relative comfort saying, 'This is interesting'... there are oppressed Christians throughout the world celebrating this story with excitement and hope - 'Yes, here is One who can set us free!'

It's not necessary that we adopt the ancient world-view of spirits, but I think we would do well to recapture the excitement that goes along with the proclamation of the Christian faith. Put simply, these are the key concepts of this faith in regard to the transforming power of Christ:

- In and through the presence of Jesus Christ, God's love rules... over everything and anything.
- God's presence and power in Jesus Christ overcomes all evil and darkness, no matter how strong, and offers the real possibility of freedom to all people.
- Wherever and however a person is stuck, chained, imprisoned, isolated... the Spirit of Christ is there offering them the gift of deliverance.
- God does not offer an anti-depressant balm - God in Jesus offers a way of total transformation... a new life.

- In and through Jesus, God creates a community, a church, of people who experience wholeness at every level of being.
- This is who we are called to be as church - a community of transformed people.

It is good that the church is a place of comfort and support, for comfort is a blessing. But we must know this... Comfort alone is an insufficient understanding of the gospel; it is a woefully insufficient proclamation of Jesus Christ; and an insufficient response to the invitation of God. If you're coming here only looking for comfort, you're short changing yourself. This is about transformation.

The evil spirit in the synagogue cries out at Jesus, "Have you come to destroy us?" The answer is 'Yes, I have'... and perhaps that's what frightens us. Jesus does come to destroy our old imprisoned lives... in order that we may be released into a new life beyond our imagining.

The kingdom of God in Mark is good news because it brings liberation at a number of levels. The central thing is enabling people to be how and whom God made them to be. That must involve addressing powers and gods that enslave us. The more we understand how they work, the richer our understanding of redemption....

Francois Fenelon (1651-1715) was a French Roman Catholic archbishop, theologian, poet and writer of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He was a passionate reformer and defender of human rights. And he understood that this transformation to which we are called by God is not of this world. He said the following: "Desire nothing but God: seek for nothing but God: and you shall taste of peace: and you shall taste it in defiance of the world."

Mark leaves us in no doubt about what constituted good news in his world, what the kingdom means, what happens when the Spirit 'baptises' people. The last thing Mark wants is for us to be left behind when we encounter his opening scene.

So when we are faced with the invitation to leave behind those things which hold us back; when we are invited to true transformation, each of us makes our own choice. What do we ask for? The decision is indeed ours, but in response to today's gospel we must know this... The Christian proclamation is unequivocal - it is the power of transformation that Christ Jesus brings to our lives, so that we might be freed by this one who speaks with authority, so that even the demons and the spirits listen to him.

In the name of God. Amen.