

A busy first day: God's liberator in action (Mark 1: 21-34)

The Man with an Unclean Spirit

21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' ²⁶And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Jesus Heals Many at Simon's House

29 As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

32 That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

(Translation © Lawrence Moore, *Mark for Missional Disciples*, Walking the Walk Publications, 2018)

Commentary

Mark's narrative style and theology:

If you read Mark as a story (rather than in isolated incidents as we usually do for preaching), you can't help but notice the frenetic pace. "And immediately ..." and "As soon as ..." rush us from one incident to another. This deliberate narrative style is because of his theology. He wants to tell us that wherever Jesus is, the new world of the Kingdom is present. And that means everything is changing. You can't encounter Jesus without the world being transformed. God is at work in Jesus. That is why there is no "ordinary time" – no "down time". Everything is packed full of meaning.

The Kingdom's presence upsets the world as we know it: everything we think of as "normal" is exposed as abnormal for God. We are used to living as slaves in chains, held captive by the occupying forces of Empire, demons and illness. It is a living hell, a living death. When Jesus appears, God's salvation is present and active.

Here, in this account of Jesus' first day, Mark introduces the themes that will be important as Mark develops his gospel further.

Jesus' teaching (Mark 1: 21-22)

Jesus teaches *with authority*, which is contrasted with that of the scribes. Jesus is operating outside the dominant religious tradition with its established authorities. He doesn't proclaim his own authority – it is evident to everyone. Its evidence is defined by its contrast with the Temple figures. It is public. Its effect is emphasised by the reaction of the hearers in vv 27ff – amazement, authority, and spiritual power. This is Jesus, ministering in the power of the Spirit. It is prophetic. The reaction of the hearers is the reaction of people who know that they are in the presence of a man of God.

He is teaching in the *synagogues*. These were the communal places where people gathered in their own communities. The contrast Mark draws is between the Temple and a teacher who operates in a different *strand* of the religion – among the ordinary people, who gather week by week in the places in which they live to hear the scriptures expounded and to worship. There is a sense in which the synagogues (as opposed to the Temple) symbolise the earliest religious traditions that centre around the Ark – ie the God who journeys with the people, rather than the centralised cult in the Jerusalem temple. This is God among the people – Mark's version of Matthew's "Emmanuel – God with us".

The demons (Mark 1: 23-28)

Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom draws immediate fire from the demons. This is the opening, public round between Jesus and the Strong Man. Just as the people sense the obvious conflict between Jesus and the Temple tradition, the demons are well aware of the immediate threat to the kingdom of the Strong Man. It is not Jesus who is actively *seeking* a confrontation; rather, the message of the kingdom provokes opposition because it proclaims another reality – another world. The world as it is cannot remain the same if his message is true.

Jesus is a powerful and successful exorcist. Exorcisms and travelling exorcists were common in Jesus' time. Exorcisms were drawn-out affairs, surrounded in drama, mumbo-jumbo, mystical acts and incantations, the use of symbols and religious artifacts, and the summoning of the higher power by whose authority the demon was to be cast out. By contrast, Jesus acts entirely on his own authority. He commands, and the unclean spirits obey. This is why his fame begins to spread *at once*. He is famed not only as a successful exorcist, but (and this is the truly amazing bit of news that has everyone agog) he does it *in his own power!* The implication is clear: only God was supposed to have that sort of power! Even a prophet, acting in the name of Yahweh, would need to summon Yahweh's power by name. This is part of Mark's Christology: Jesus incarnates God's power and presence in the midst of the people.

“Be silent!” Jesus’ command to the spirit operates on two levels. Firstly, as an exorcistic technique, Jesus characteristically refuses to let the demon speak. Unlike his contemporaries, Jesus does not engage in lengthy disputes with the spirits, or let them “do their stuff”. In effect, he muzzles them. He will not allow them to display their power, because he is the one who has authority over them. Secondly, this is also part of Mark’s theme of the messianic secret. The demons know who Jesus is (v24), and when they declare his identity, Jesus silences them. The point is that Jesus will not allow his messiahship to be defined and understood by his authority over demons and illness, however important that is. Rather, his messiahship will be defined by the cross – by his *humility* rather than by his power.

Jesus’ healing (Mark 1: 29-34)

We will look more closely at Jesus’ healings as we journey through the gospel. The important thing to note is that the healings not only restore people to health, but restore them to their communities as well. Sickness excludes people and fractures society; Jesus heals both individuals and communities.

This is why Mark notes that Peter’s mother-in-law “begins to serve them” (v 31). While we may find this callous and chauvinistic, in Jesus’ context, the woman is restored to her place and dignity as a host. In Jesus’ society, hosting and waiting on people was a privilege, not a drudge or something lowly (as it is in African and Asian society today). Jesus doesn’t heal her to enslave her, but to free her.

Turning the world upside down (Mark 1: 32-34)

Mark paints a picture of Capernaum as a village where demon possession and illnesses were widespread. Brokenness and despair, in other words, is the norm. People experienced their own helplessness in the face of these as captivity; Jesus is the messiah/liberator who has come to set them free – to establish God’s norm of wholeness and flourishing. This is the Kingdom, present and active in Jesus.

For reflection:

1. In what ways do people experience themselves as helpless captives, and life as a living hell? In what ways are brokenness, despair, helplessness and death “the norm” that we take for granted?
2. What are the norms – the “rules” - of church life that we assume can’t be altered, and which might limit what we can do to make a Jesus-shaped difference? How much of our church life (let alone public life) is governed by scarcity rather than abundance? How would you begin to challenge these?
3. Jesus saw the Roman occupation, the occupying demonic forces and the power of illness to hold people captive against God’s intentions for wholeness and flourishing as all of one piece. In what sense is there a spiritual dimension to their equivalents in our own society? Addiction? Eating disorders? Poverty? Race, class, gender and sexuality issues? Rampant consumerism? Climate change? How might that recognition alter

our take and preaching on them? Or how we pray during intercessions, for example? How does it shape what discipleship and mission mean?

4. What do you hear Jesus calling or challenging you to do? What do you hear Jesus calling or challenging your church to do?

Resources

Images/multimedia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PcCRSalstEU> (work out when to hit "Pause"!)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEP9zoT0s1E>

<http://www.textweek.com/art/healing.htm>

<http://www.servicioskoinonia.org/cerezo/indexBgraf.html>

<http://seedstuff.blogspot.co.uk/2015/01/epiphany-4b-february-1-power-nd.html>

Children

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TaBYU53e0_k

<http://worshipingwithchildren.blogspot.co.uk/2015/01/year-b-4th-sunday-after-epiphany-4th.html>

Hymns & prayers

<http://lectionarypoems.blogspot.co.uk/2015/01/hymn-for-february-1-2015-based-on-mark.html>

<http://www.newhymn.com/057Awesome.htm>

<http://lectionarysong.blogspot.co.uk/2015/01/songs-hymns-music-for-epiphany-4b.html>

<http://youcallthatchurchmusic.blogspot.co.uk/2014/12/february-1-2015-epiphany-iv-year-b.html>

<http://www.bruceprewer.com/DocB/BEIPHANY4.htm>

<http://www.liturgylink.net/category/ordinary-time/ordinary-year-b/ordinary-2b-8b/ordinary-4b/>

Creator God,
we see your goodness and your greatness in the world around us;
in the vibrancy of colour,
the intricacy of design,
the delicate veins of the leaves,
and the grandeur of the mountain crags.
We marvel at the richness of the tapestry you have woven;
we stand in awe of your creative power.

Divine Weaver

You have taken the threads of our lives
and knit them together with yours in Jesus.

By your Spirit

You call us to stitch with you the canvas of resurrection;
of hope for a world of despair;
of joy for a world of sadness;
of forgiveness for a world wrapped in guilt;
of healing for broken people and a broken planet.

Yours are the colours of dreams;

Yours are the stitches that make whole;

Yours are the threads of Life.

Glory to you, breathtaking God.

Amen.

(Lawrence Moore)