

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In today's gospel, Mark gives us a remarkable account of the manifestation of Jesus as the Son of God at the very outset of his public ministry. This morning's lesson describes an event which occurred in Capernaum during a single 24-hour period. It is Jesus alone who acts here. Later, the disciples will figure prominently, but here it is Jesus alone who is featured. This one day in Capernaum combines within it "all the main features of Jesus' Galilean ministry --- *exorcism, healing, and proclamation.*" With reference to exorcisms, "it is mainly in the New Testament, particularly in the Gospel of Mark, that most narratives about exorcism are found. Capernaum, the site of the event, was "a significant lakeside settlement, sufficiently important to have a detachment of Roman troops, was a customs post, and had a resident official of the government stationed there. It may have had a population in the neighborhood of 10,000."

Jesus here is first acknowledged by the Jews in the synagogue he attends ---which would have had "a considerable sabbath congregation" --- and in which he expounds on scripture. The usual teachers, "priests and scribes, the literate ones, (including) Pharisees as well," did not teach as Jesus did, so they were amazed at the "quiet yet compelling authority" with which he spoke. During this episode, Jesus is recognized by a demoniac and challenged which results in the first exorcism we have a record of. And the word "exorcize" in Greek comes from the word for authority or power; it also conveys the sense of the "sovereign freedom of one who acts without hindrance." So, here Jesus demonstrates his authority in a public setting in such a way as to cause consternation, amazement and the beginning of acknowledgment of his self-described nature as a man of God. That's a lot to pack into a single episode, but recall that Mark is exceedingly economical with the words he chooses. When read to a small audience of seekers, this single incident would have transforming power.

Mark's Jesus is not so much a teacher as an exorcist. We see this because the event is occurring in a synagogue where he expounds but also takes direct action to demonstrate his authority. The unclean spirit appears in the midst of a holy place, a ritually pure place. The unclean spirit is in that sacred space on the Sabbath. Its very existence there is an affront to God in the view of the Jews. Only power can drive it out. This spirit recognizes Jesus, knows precisely who he is and what power he wields, and the threat is visible and real. Without any explanation, Jesus simply proceeds to drive the demons from the man who is possessed. He does this of his own volition, without even a request from those in attendance at the synagogue that day. In Mark's view, this demonstrates the "inbreaking presence of God" in the person of Jesus.

This is "not Torah study as usual," but a living example of the far-reaching nature of God's reign and its power to destroy the powers of this world which seek to oppose it. Jesus is no ordinary rabbi. What he

says causes “astonishment.” This is radically new. This is “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” In the next few weeks, we will see other examples of the miracles we associate with Jesus, but those miracles go well beyond physical or biological cures of the sick. After all, “it seems unlikely that Jesus would have been tortured to death for simply healing the sick.” That’s why today’s reading is such a fitting lesson for the season of Epiphany, because here we begin to grasp the great distinction between other prophets of Israel and this young Jew who possesses unprecedented presence and power.

The words “teaching” and “authority” link the two sub-units of the reading into a single passage (that is, his teaching in the synagogue and his encounter with the demoniac). And even the word for “immediately” would give a listener little time to “catch his breath” in the economy of words that is so characteristic of Mark’s gospel. This is a story that would simply have swept one along in a kind of growing intensity and amazement. If the people attending synagogue that day were stunned, imagine the reaction of a small group of seekers listening to Mark’s account for the first time.

The scribes were “originally the people who copied the scriptures,” but they came to be known for their “detailed understanding” of the Jewish tradition. The teaching of Jesus had “authority” because “when he spoke it came to pass.” Though the scribes taught with erudition, Jesus interpreted scripture as one “who has the right to say what it means.” His teaching “has no need of external support, whether from Scriptures of elsewhere.” His word is “self-authenticating,” in part because it was fresh and arresting. The scribes were known for their traditional understanding of scripture, and Jesus regarded this view as “inadequate.” His teaching was new --- so radically new that it threatened to “break the old mold.” And it is this which got him “into deadly conflict with the worldly authorities.”

In the first century, illness went beyond a mere biomedical condition. It “threatened communal integrity and holiness and had to be removed.” In this sense, we see that “Jesus seeks always to restore the social wholeness denied” to the sick and the possessed. This is why in the New Testament his healings or exorcisms are “virtually interchangeable with his social intercourse” with those he sought to return to right relationship with the community in which they lived. Because these acts appeared to challenge the laws of nature, they were powerful. Part of that power is attributable to the fact that his healing and exorcism “functioned to elaborate the dominant social order, unmasking the way in which it legitimated concrete social relationships.” Insofar as that social order dehumanized life for those in the larger community, Jesus was challenging that social order and defying its strictures.” And, again, Jesus would hardly have been betrayed, tried and executed for merely healing the sick. Defying the whole social order would, however, have had to bring stark consequences.

Mark’s use of terms to describe the reactions of the observers of these miracles tells us a lot about the power of this passage. The words “astounded” and “amazed” would be more accurately conveyed in

English as “blown out of their minds” because what they were observing was “so incomprehensible that one’s mind can’t fathom what has been experienced.” Even for us, living in the modern world, “the acceptance by Jesus and the restoration of the unclean/ostracized man to the community” would likely also be perceived as “amazing” and “troublesome.” If the text ends by saying that the fame of Jesus began to spread, what it does not say is what is now obvious to us: that what he was doing and saying both attracted people” or “offended” them. What Jesus said and did “disrupted the world.”

In reality, Jesus “in a worldly sense” did not have any power at all. He was not of the priestly class or a member of any elite group, nor did he wield power as did the Roman conquerors and their regional overlords. The only power he had “was the supreme confidence that what he did was God’s will.” The sheer power of his words and their example in his deeds brought immediate recognition.” His authority lay in” his living as God’s servant.” What this account demonstrates is that “the kingdom of God, the reign and rule of God’s power and authority” is manifested in Jesus Christ. Thus, this is the ultimate Epiphany story. Here, Mark is showing us that this Jesus of Nazareth is a “boundary breaker,” and the confirmation comes in the exorcism which completes the story. God is breaking through. He is overcoming the political, social, religious, ethnic, racial, sexual, and gendered barriers that tether us to the past. Mark has managed a in a mere eight sentences to tell us “*both* how Jesus became so popular so quickly and of how the course of his public career pointed inexorably to its dramatic conclusion.”

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation. Great are the deeds of the Lord! they are studied by all who delight in them. His work is full of majesty and splendor, and his righteousness endures forever...He sent redemption to his people; he commanded his covenant forever; holy and awesome is his Name.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

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