

# Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

## The Text: Mark 1:21-28

The setting of today's text is Capernaum, a significant settlement in ancient times of about 1500 people. Capernaum was a thriving fishing village on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. It's the home town to the apostles Peter, James, Andrew and John, themselves fishermen, who Jesus called to follow him as his disciples.

Importantly today's text is set on a Saturday, the day of the Sabbath; the day in the week that God had commanded Israel to rest by coming into His presence to receive His divine favour. Mark tells us that as soon as the Sabbath came Jesus entered the synagogue and was teaching them. The picture we have is of utter silence; of being able to hear a pin drop, because all mouths are closed, every eye is fixed on Jesus; every ear straining towards his words. All are amazed at Jesus' teaching, because He teaches as one having authority, not like the scribes, Mark tells us. Now what does it mean that "...they were amazed at his teaching for was teaching them as one having authority, *not as the scribes?*" This is an important question especially as the subject of authority is clearly a key one in today's text. "...they were amazed at Jesus' teaching for He was teaching them as one having authority, *not as the scribes.* The scribes were like theologians of the day. They were a part of the Sanhedrin, which was the ruling council of Israel. These guys had authority. But not authority like Jesus. Speakers giving an address on what we know as the Old Testament Scriptures would introduce their sermon with: "Thus says the Lord" when proclaiming a message that came from the prophets, or if they were giving an address on the first five books of the Bible (referred to as the Torah and treasured by Israel on the same level as we revere the Gospels), they would say: "Moses says".

Jesus is different. He doesn't appeal to other Scriptural authority but claims divine authority for himself. For example, in his sermon on the mount, in Matthew 5, Jesus says "You have heard it said...*but I tell you...*" He says: "*I say to you* many will come from the East and the West and will take their places at the feast with Abraham..." (Mt 8:11). "*I say to all of you:* in the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Mt 26:64). "Little girl, *I say to you,* get up!" and immediately the girl who had died stood up and walked around (Mark 5:41). "*I say to you:* Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to

you". These are just some of the many occasions where Jesus says: "/ say to you".

Jesus teaches as one having authority, Mark says, not as the scribes—and this is seen clearly in the episode that takes place next. Evil manifests in a man with an unclean spirit, who shouts out: "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"

Imagine that! Jesus' audience is still silent, but now for different reasons. They're stunned. Imagine their shock and fear! Our first thought is, what a terrible and chaotic disruption! "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"

On the one hand, this is a terrible disruption. Jesus is in the synagogue preaching. The unclean spirit cries out and stops the address in its tracks. Yet, on the other, God has allowed this to happen for his purposes. This unclean spirit is being used as God's puppet. For, unwittingly, there in the synagogue, the place for proclaiming divine truth, this unclean spirit has just proclaimed the true identity of Jesus. The demon has acknowledged that Jesus is truly human. He has a local origin. He comes from Nazareth. Yet this Jesus who is fully human is no-one other than the holy of God! Fully human Jesus is at the same time truly Divine. There you have it right there—the demon has just proclaimed what the whole Old Testament has pointed to—this Jesus is God's own Son. We might be reminded of the verse James 2:19: "You believe that there is one God. Good! *Even the demons believe that—and shudder!*"

This unclean spirit would be shuddering. It knows who Jesus is and what is about to happen. This is the perfect opportunity for Jesus to demonstrate that his authority is real. That what he says, goes. Mark records for us that Jesus rebuked this unclean spirit, saying: "Be silent and come out of him!" And having convulsed the man the unclean spirit cried out in a great voice and came out of him". We would expect a power struggle, but there is none. There is no special ritual needed. Jesus simply commands and the unclean spirit does what it's told. And so Mark records that all in attendance at the synagogue were astonished: "What is this...a *new* teaching with authority? He even commands the unclean spirits and they submit to Him!" Yes, this Jesus teaches with authority like none other.

There are some major parallels with this text and the creation account in Genesis. In Genesis 1 we hear: "The earth was formless and empty, darkness was over *the surface of the deep*, and the Spirit of God was hovering *over the waters*." Genesis tells us that before God started

creating, there is this dark, watery, unordered mass. In Jewish thought, this symbolised chaos and evil. Other ancient creation mythologies have a similar watery mass that is personified as a type of chaos monster with which the gods do battle to eventually bring good order out of chaos. But in the Genesis creation account there is no divine cosmic struggle in the beginning because God is the Almighty God who has all authority. God simply speaks good order into existence. God said: "Let there be light" and there was light. He separated the light from the darkness. Light shines in the darkness. Light exposes darkness and drives it away. God said: "Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water". And it was so. God called the expanse 'sky'. And God said 'Let the water under the sky be gather to one place, and let dry ground appear'. And it was so. We miss the rich theology behind this because we haven't grown up in the Jewish worldview. This opening of Genesis is profound. It is saying that God has all authority and control and everything obeys his command. God brings light into darkness and good order out of chaos.

Mark shows Jesus as the Son of God who has authority over creation—both the man and the unclean spirit. He is the Light of the world shining in the darkness of the life of the man with the unclean spirit that day there in the synaogue in Capernaum, God again brought light into darkness and good order into chaos, simply by speaking: "Be silent and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, a representative of the entire kingdom of darkness, the entire demonic realm of evil, opposed to every good that God has established, could do nothing but obey Jesus. Because what God says happens.

The unclean spirit has an acute awareness that evil in the presence of Jesus is doomed. "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?"

Mark's whole purpose in today's text is not to focus on the man or the unclean spirit, but on Jesus; the One who has authority over evil to destroy it's power and stranglehold on humanity. Throughout his ministry on earth Jesus showed his authority time and time again over Satan's evil empire by freeing those who were bound in the kingdom of darkness. These miracles pointed ahead to where he once for all won the victory over evil, where, on the cross he made a mockery of the demonic realm and trampled over it. He descended into hell to preach to the spirits his victory and in triumph he rose again to conquer the wages of sin and bring life for the world. That is why, though we live in the midst of evil and uncleanness, they need not paralyze us with fear for Jesus has authority over it, to do away with it—and he has, for the whole world.

But today's text also shows us that not only does Jesus destroy the power of evil, but He has compassion on the victims of it. He uses his authority not for himself but for the sake of others; to bless and serve. He is the One who rescues, who unbinds, who makes whole, who gives hope of new beginnings, as He did for the man possessed with an unclean spirit. He freed him from the dark bondage to which he was trapped, just as he has freed us from our bondage to the kingdom of darkness, and brought us into his kingdom of light.

So even though evil seemingly rages around us, and even though we are at times all too aware of the uncleanness of our sin in the light of God's Word, do not despair, brothers and sisters, but remain faithful to our Lord and His authoritative teaching, for all those who do will stand on the final day, beholding the face of the Lamb of God who has come to do away with our sin and triumph over evil for us.

Until that time, Jesus continues to defeat evil for us every Sunday by forgiving our sin, speaking His words of life to us, by purifying us with His body and blood. Like he was in the Capernaum synagogue, Jesus is truly present here, preaching and teaching his authoritative word. What he says happens. He declares grace to us. He reads the readings to us. He proclaims his mighty promises to us. He leads us in prayer to his Father with the prayer he teaches his disciples to pray. He blesses us as you return to your homes. Every Sunday He is present reaching out in compassion and grace to take our uncleanness and give us His righteousness and holiness. No evil can overcome that. Nothing can get in his way or stop him. Not even a cross, or a tomb.

We have been freed by our loving Lord, the almighty God over heaven and earth and all that is, seen and unseen, even the demonic realm. We have been freed. For what? To live in freedom. To serve God and one another in freedom. We have been freed to ask the same question that's asked in our text: "What do you want with us Jesus of Nazareth?" The difference is we need not ask it in fear and trembling, or out of compulsion, but joyfully, in response to the lavish love of God.

"What do you want with us Jesus of Nazareth? What uncleanness would you have us hand over to you? What do you want us to give to you so that obstacles preventing us from showing your compassion and encouragement are removed? What priorities do you want us to reorganise, so that we do not lose opportunities to rest with you and reach out to others? What do you want with us Jesus of Nazareth? Lead us to your word and preach to us, with all authority, so that what you say comes to pass. Give us ears to hear you and understand, hands that serve you and feet that follow where you lead. Speak your creative power

into our hearts so that we serve others with the same compassion that you showed to the man in the Capernaum synagogue.

You are here too Jesus. This is your church. Preach to us. Astonish us with your authority. Comfort us with your gospel, bring assurance that your promises are to each one of us. Purify us with your most precious blood and work in us what is pleasing to you. What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? For you are our Saviour and the source of all life. You are the Holy One of God, and we belong to you. Amen.