

SERMON - 31/01/21
(PARISH COMBINED SERVICE 9.30AM)

Text: Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Mark 1:21-28

Focus of text: Jesus' ministry in Capernaum

Purpose: To encourage people to join the spiritual battle as a follower of Jesus.

Title: Ministry in the power of the Spirit.

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May the word of God be spoken and heard. Amen.

In my younger years I watched lots of old westerns on TV. And there's a typical scenario in these movies that seems to be playing out here in Mark's Gospel.

Sometimes a town was taken over by the bad guys, who controlled things by the force of their own power. They removed or coerced the lawmen - the sheriff and his deputies - they took charge and did whatever they liked. What the ordinary, decent people in town needed then was some hero to ride into town and set things to rights.

Today Jesus gets into town into Capernaum, with four of his men, but as far as we know from the story only one of them, Jesus himself, goes to where the people are gathered. In a western it's the saloon. In the Gospel story it's the synagogue.

In westerns, all eyes are on the hero when he goes into the saloon - the bartender looks up from the bar. We pan around the saloon and some of those gathered there are hoping the hero can change things. Others are just itching to confront him. We know that there will be conflict of some sort. The only questions in our minds are: Who's going to make the first move and how's the conflict going to play out?

As we learned in our seminar on Mark's Gospel a couple of weeks ago, one of the key themes of this Gospel is the spiritual battle between Jesus and the devil - the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world and Satan its ruler.

The writer of Mark and other New Testament writers have the view that the world is under the control of the devil and his bad guys, his forces of evil, and it needs to be liberated.

And if it's going to be liberated there is going to be a conflict, because the powers of evil are not going to let go without a fight.

Turn to chapter 13 of the Gospel and it's all about that conflict.

But you can find it in the rest of the Gospel too.

And we find it here, right at the start of Jesus' ministry. By putting it first, the Gospel-writer is telling us that this is a key thing about Jesus, that he defeats the powers of evil with the holy power of God.

And as far as we know, this was the way that Jesus understood it himself.

The writer of Mark's Gospel shows us a world that is under the control of dark forces.

And God has decided to do something about that.

Jesus, the Holy One of God, has come to town.

He's not looking for trouble, but trouble will find him because of what he represents, because he doesn't accept the powers of control that have bound the people.

At first when Jesus enters the synagogue he probably reads from the Scriptures and then he is given the opportunity to speak.

And what the people in the synagogue immediately notice is the way that Jesus teaches - 'with authority and not as the scribes.'

Presumably that's because he talks plainly and doesn't go through a whole list of what this commentator and that scholar has said about the passage.

He just says what things mean or how people should act.

He teaches how people can welcome God into their lives.

He speaks with authority and he speaks on his own authority – he speaks with God's authority.

Isn't it interesting that what the Gospel-writer focuses on is the effect of Jesus' teaching.

He doesn't even tell us what Jesus was saying.

But you've got to think that what he was saying wasn't just nice safe talk, "It's so good to be here and God loves us all."

Jesus seems by his presence and words to have been a threat to the forces of power and control in Capernaum - because one spoke up against him.

"There was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?"

This is an odd expression which perhaps could better be translated, "Leave us alone, Jesus of Nazareth!"

"Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God."

Wow! Can you imagine the atmosphere in the synagogue?

All eyes would have been riveted on that conflict.

Trouble had found him.

I have so many questions about this passage.

"There was a man in the synagogue."

Was he a visitor?

Was he a regular?

Was he on Vestry?

How much did he represent the status quo - the forces of power and control right there in that place?

Or was he totally an outsider?

And what was the nature of his spiritual bondage?

Was the challenge of Jesus' holiness too much for him to bear?

Do we allow ourselves to experience the challenge that Jesus is to our more selfish preferences, our secret sins, our accommodations with what is less than holy...?

In this conflict, Jesus understood that he wasn't battling with flesh and blood.

The man who was in bondage needed release and healing.

Jesus took issue with the unclean spirit that was harming the man and keeping him in bondage.

"Be silent and come out of him," was the command.

And at his word the spirit cried out and left.

It wasn't just Jesus' teaching but his actions and his commands that had remarkable authority.

I want to acknowledge here that the whole idea of evil spirits and exorcism seems unbelievable or dangerous or even frightening to many people.

Too great a focus on forces of evil has led to really bad situations of spiritual abuse at times.

Some might even think that the understandings of modern medicine and psychology remove any need for ideas of spiritual conflict - but I don't.

There are spiritual strongholds that do keep people bound.

The principalities and powers that Saint Paul talks about can be seen in racism or religious fanaticism, or violence or sexual exploitation or political lies, or selfishness, greed and materialism.

These spiritual forces are at work every day in our world. And Jesus came to deal with them.

As the writer of the First Letter of John says, "The reason the son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil." (1 John 3:8)

He did this in order to set people free.

In St Luke's Gospel, the opening ministry that Jesus performs is to apply the words of Isaiah to himself and say, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

But in Mark's Gospel we don't know what Jesus said in that first sermon.

All we know is that he acted to bring release to the captive and to let the oppressed go free.

It happens before our eyes in this passage.

And how does Jesus do that?

As the people in the synagogue might ask, "By what power and authority is he doing it?"

He is doing it by the Spirit of God.

Jesus words are spoken and his deeds are done in the power of God's Spirit.

He is doing it because he is the Son of God, the "Holy One of God" whom the unclean spirit knows him to be.

So what can we learn from this that will help us not only recognise who Jesus is, but live and act as his followers?

Jesus had power of himself because he was the Son of God.

The Spirit of God lived in him - it was His Spirit.

He brought the Spirit with him wherever he went.

Of course, we don't have that same authority and power in and of ourselves.

But we do have that power when we receive it from Jesus. We have that power when we are connected – united with him.

This power isn't a sort of magical power to win every battle and always come out on top.

It's the power of Jesus' own character and Spirit.

It's the power to act like Jesus in all sorts of ways

- the power to be humble;
- the power to do things God's way;
- the power even to suffer if God asks that of us, as we will see later in the Gospel, and as we know in our own hearts.

For you, Guy and Summer and Andy and Emily, as people taking a further step in leadership in Christ's service, I pray that you would always be so close to Jesus that you would have his Spirit within you.

There may be conflict or victory or suffering - or all three of them - along the path.

But you will minister in the power of the Spirit if you are constantly connected to Jesus and share his life – and I know that you are absolutely committed to that.

In fact, that's not only my prayer for you it's my prayer for myself, it's my prayer for us - that we would keep so close to Jesus that God's Spirit would be at work in us to bring his healing and wholeness and liberation.

One of the spiritual battles we face in this society is to see our fellowship with Christ as the first Christians saw it, as the saints through the ages have seen it.

They didn't see it as an enhancement to an already good life, something that was nice to have but not essential.

They saw it as the transforming difference in their life.

They saw it as the life within their life.

It was the thing.

It was the pearl of great price.

It was worth selling everything they had to gain it.

Sometimes in westerns, the hero cleans up the town and everyone wants him to stay.

But he very rarely does.

Jesus didn't stay in Capernaum.

And you guys aren't staying here.

In fact, the only staying we can really be committed to as Jesus' followers is staying true to God's purpose and staying true to Jesus, united to him.

May we all stay true to Jesus Christ, to his Spirit and to his calling in our lives, wherever our paths lead us.

Amen.