

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

31.01.2021
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Introduction

In this Sunday's reading we are introduced to a major theme in Mark's gospel: that of authority. While Jesus does retain a certain secrecy about his identity in this earliest gospel, there are recognitions and wonderings about his authority – and the source of his authority – everywhere. Jesus' character emerges in a strong way: while he is secretive about who he understands himself to be, he is not demure about his authority, nor is he self-doubting.

Text

Mark 1:21–28

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then 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? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They 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." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Comment

Today's text is a powerful one. It is right at the start of Mark's gospel — we are still only at the beginning of the drama — and the first confrontation with opposition arises.

In Mark's gospel, there are often demons, or *a person with an unclean spirit* who arise. Many contemporary readers wonder what to do with this set of characters in Mark's gospel. Some may imagine that Mark was using demonological language to

describe what we would now diagnose. While there may be compassion behind this, it does pose the problem of associating illness (today) with demonic ascriptions (then). Any of us who have lived with mental ill-health may feel like such imaginations are not as compassionate in their impact as they are imagined to be in their intent.

As with many questions in gospel literature, it is worthwhile examining them in light of the overall purpose of the gospel. Mark's gospel demonstrates a Messiah who is reluctant to be recognised, and yet driven on a mission. He is recognised by gentiles (Mark 5) and demons (Mark 1, 5 etc) and by some among his own. But when he is recognised among his own, he often asks them to maintain their belief in his identity as a secret.

The writer, or writers, of Mark's gospel believed very powerfully in the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. The writers, too, wished to demonstrate that Jesus' identity had a powerful impact, even while Jesus was wishing to be subtle. And in this context, enter the literary function of the supernatural, whether divine or demonic. Throughout Mark's gospel, the cosmological forces recognise Jesus: a voice comes from the heavens in the earliest accounts in the first chapter. In the fourth chapter, as we'll see later during the lectionary year, the waves rise up; in the fifth chapter, the Gerasene demoniac shouts out "What do you want with me, Jesus Son of the Most High God?" In the face of the supernatural, Jesus' secrecy is ineffectual — the stones, the waves, the clouds, and even the underworld shouts out about him.

The voice in this week's text — "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" — is a voice of a threatened order. It asks: what are you going to make of our power?; what new powers will you bring?; what disruption?; how are you going to treat those devils you displace through your proclamation of justice and power? And Jesus' response to this established order is strong. Often in English language translations, his reply *phimo* is translated as "be silent" but this is not strong enough. The term would be better rendered as "be muzzled". Muzzled, like a rabid dog, able to bark, but not bite. This is an extraordinary demonstration of the containment of fear. It growls, but cannot infect. It can make noise, but is kept in its place. Mark's usage of demonology is a study in the relationship to certain kinds of fear. Fear seems to know so much about us, but Mark's Jesus is a character undominated by fear, even as he knows it.

The people's recognition of Jesus' authority is evident in this week's lectionary reading. In fact, the authority of Jesus is one that perplexes his devotees and detractors throughout this text. When, in Mark 11, the authorities question Jesus about his authority, he won't give them an honest answer, because they are not coming with an honest question. "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things" Jesus says.

Conflict resolution is not about the abdication of authority; rather it is about recognising authority — true, accountable, trustable, fair, just, scrutable, honest — and following that with strength and conviction, in the context of negotiation, relationship and assertion. These are not easy things to hold in tension. At times, I wonder how easy it would have been to negotiate with Jesus, he whose conviction was underlined by an extraordinary assertion and confidence. We see in the character of Jesus one who was not afraid of authority, even when it was being carried by him. Often, in the context of conflict resolution, or peace negotiations, we might find ourselves imagining that peace will be proclaimed by the practice of deference. "No, *you* have your way; no, I insist, *you* have *your* way." This is more likely a demonstration of fear than of peace; true peace builds on a recognition of authority, and deep conflicts will always have a fundamental chasm about authority at the heart.

We live in times where arguments are so frequent as to almost be entertainment. Next time you are in a serious disagreement* with someone, it may be useful to consider asking questions to explore the trust they place in the authority they are taking to be important; not to deride it, but to seek to understand it. Can deeper understanding come about from such a fundamental recognition? Does it provide the possibility of new negotiations?

**By saying a "serious disagreement", I mean a serious disagreement where you are disagreeing on an opinion, or a point of view; where both parties are safe enough to discuss without the possibility of threat on one or the other person in the disagreement. Such conflicts are entirely distinct from a situation of oppression, exclusion, marginalisation or threat. It is important to note that these are not areas to consider conflict resolution.*

Prayer

Jesus of Nazareth,
You came, with such authority,
and people listened, spirits balked,
even the waves rose up.
May we find the kind of authority that
makes justice flow;
and when we hear it, follow;
and when we have it, speak.
Because we are all in need of
words that make lives flourish
and respond.
Amen.

Further Reading

Friends, we are delighted to let you know that there is a new book coming from some of the Spirituality of Conflict writers. Myself (Pádraig), and our dearly beloved and dearly missed Glenn Jordan, wrote a book on reading contemporary anxieties about Borders through the lens of the Hebrew Book of Ruth. [You can order the book from Canterbury Press](#), or join one of the book launches on zoom at [7pm Irish/British time on 15th February](#), or at [7pm New York time on the 15th February](#).
