



Reflection by Rev'd Tony Meek

**Fourth Sunday of Epiphany
Year B
Mark 1.21-28
28th January 2024**

The main point to take from this story of Jesus teaching with authority is that He is not content with leaving things as they are, if “things as they are” are wrong. Jesus is confrontational; he is not handing out polite invitations, he is asserting the authority of the kingdom of God in a world of opposition.

This is why what we do here in church, and what we are here is so serious. We are neither a luncheon club nor a social club; we are the church, called into being by God, created to be a vanguard of his kingdom in this world. Jesus is not the lonely child looking for friends; he is the Lord, and he calls his people disciples. He is willing to confront evil on every level – on the world wide level, on the political level, and on the personal level. When he says “follow me” there is a wrong answer, and it is any answer but “yes.” I think Mark is telling us that the usual teaching in that synagogue had within it elements which attracted the man with the unclean spirit; his demon liked what he heard from that pulpit.

Perhaps the first wrong idea that was previously being taught from that synagogue is about God himself: the idea that God cares about something besides people first. That is a demonic idea. The idea that he cares about ritual more than people, or that he cares about bloodlines more than people, or that he cares about rules more than people – that is demonic. God made every single person to bear his image. What could he care about more? So, it's no good to keep yourself pure from contact with blood if it means avoiding the man who was robbed on the Jericho road (as in the parable of the Good Samaritan). God demands that we stop, pick him up, get our hands dirty and bloody, and take responsibility for his care. To teach otherwise is to teach a demonic lesson.

Perhaps another wrong idea previously being taught in that synagogue is closely connected: that God cares about some people more than others. That he cares about our ethnic group more than theirs. In the same story, remember it was the despised Samaritan who helped the victim – and he became the heroic “neighbour” of that teaching. The same God who made us in his image, who loves us, who wants our best is the one who hates it when we or any of his people suffer injustice, oppression, discrimination, exclusion. He hates the way pride and arrogance tear relationships and communities apart. He is opposed to things that addict us, seduce us into covenant-breaking, or lull us into apathy. But his goal is not our destruction for being willing participants in evil, but our redemption from evil.

God calls us to be Jesus' disciples, his followers, not because we are good enough for him, but in order to change us, to make us into something we did not start out to be. We do not say yes to him because we are good, because we know we are not good – but we hear his call, and we know he has the authority over the demonic forces at work in every human heart – ours included. We do not come to God to have our lifestyles validated, but rather to submit ourselves to his authority. If that means that he needs to confront the demonic in my life, so be it. Jesus is Lord. If this means he will challenge my values, so be it. If this means he will demolish some of my culture's attitudes, expose my hypocrisy and blindness, my complicity and acceptance of “the way things are” – he has the right to do so.

And here is the final irony – that though the exorcism is painful, though the man convulses and it looks like the procedure has harmed him, the opposite is true. He has been liberated; released. That poor man was at the mercy of powers that held him in bondage to their malevolent desires – he was being used. Jesus set him free. Jesus rescued him from the kingdom of darkness to live a new life in the kingdom of God.

That is what he wants for every one of us: our freedom, our joy, our unforced response of love and obedience. This is amazing. Let the demons shriek: we are disciples!

So, on this sacred day as we look forward to the celebration of Candlemas, in this sacred space, with its candles burning, we gather to learn; to deepen our understanding, to sit at his feet as his disciples and to be amazed at his teaching. We gather to re-affirm his authority in our lives. Then, we scatter from this sacred space to go out in to the world he has made as the vanguard of his kingdom in the world. We go out to take the power of his transforming love to the people in bondage to evil, to proclaim release and freedom to them.