

28th January 2018

Preacher: John Lampard

Hymns: 87 Praise to the living God!
161 Speak, O Lord, as we come to you
97 When all your mercies, O my God
516 What shall I do my God to love?

Readings: Deuteronomy 29.10-15
Jeremiah 31.31-34
Romans 12.1-2
Mark 14.22-25

“BEWARE THE POWER OF GOD!”

Whenever I read a gospel passage, like today's lection, in which Jesus casts out an evil spirit, my mind goes back to an event very early in my ministry – in the early 1970s when we started our ministry in Leeds.

Early one Sunday morning I was sitting at my desk, reading through that morning's service and sermon, when suddenly there was a frantic hammering on the manse front door. When I opened it there were two young men, shaking with fear. Before I could ask what the trouble was they asked if I was a priest, well sort of, and they said. We have an evil spirit in our flat and it has attacked us. Will you come to our flat to get rid of it? It was clear that this was not an attempted send up, so I grabbed a cross and the holiest object to hand, my grandfather's Bible, and ushered them into my car as they lived a mile or so away. My car was an old banger which sometimes back-fired after it had started. It did, and they both hit the roof in terror. When we got to their flat, typical inner-city student accommodation, they were anxious that I went first, reaching over my shoulder to unlock the door. I must admit, with some trepidation, I pushed the door open, hesitated, and walked in. I'll tell you what happened when we have looked at Mark's Gospel.

Each of the Gospel writers introduces their account of the good news in different ways. Luke begins in a gentle lilting style and in a purposive way, 'Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us.' It doesn't exactly grab you; you know you are in for the long haul. So John begins his Gospel with deep, stirring, searching words 'In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God.'

Matthew has his own approach, 'An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah'; followed by 16 verses containing dozens of names you have never heard of.

But when I read Mark's Gospel I am immediately hit between the eyes. You will all know the beginning of Beethoven's most famous symphony his 5th. Da da da DAR. Mark's Gospel explodes with the powerful words, 'The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. Behind his words is the urgent warning, beware of the power of God.

Like Beethoven's 5th symphony he then moves on rapidly (far faster than the other Gospel writers) and in just 20 verses covers his introduction, verses from the OT, the ministry of John the Baptist, Jesus' baptism, his temptation and the call of the first disciples. Just 20 verses.

He uses the word 'immediately' three times (twice in the call of the disciples) to emphasise a sense of urgency and driving power. God has broken in, everything is changing. Everything he says, like Beethoven's music, throbs with power and energy. In a very domestic image, as you read it, it feels like standing too close to a washing machine when it is running at full revolutions.

Then the pace changes slightly, but not the underlying sense of power, and Mark offers what some commentators call, a Specimen Day in Jesus' Ministry. It's a Markan creation, drawing together typical events to say, this is what it was like if you were with Jesus. It's a day packed with teaching, healing both physical and mental illnesses, and an unsuccessful attempt by Jesus to find quiet time for prayer. He's not the only one.

The day is centred on the busy frontier town of Capernaum, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, where it seems Jesus centred his ministry. It's all contained in the Gospel words read a few moments ago. First there's a visit to the synagogue in Capernaum, on the Sabbath. There is strong archaeological evidence that at that time there were no distinctive synagogue buildings, none have been found among contemporary excavations. They probably became distinctive buildings after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Instead of having a building dedicated to worship, like this, people met in a town hall, or meeting place – just as many new churches today meet in schools or other public buildings.

What is distinctive is that as soon as Jesus entered the synagogue meeting he took charge. Mark is saying, God is on the front foot. And then Jesus taught. Mark's Gospel is very frustrating in that, like Paul's letters, he rarely tells us what Jesus taught – you have to rely on the other Gospels for that. While we are not told what Jesus taught, we are told about the stunned reaction. 'They were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes'. It's frustratingly difficult for us to enter into that situation, but perhaps to put it simply, when he spoke he made sense, he cut to the heart of a matter. When he spoke people sat up, but when he spoke it wasn't just words. When he spoke things happened.

They happened to an innocent bystander, who hadn't come for healing. He hadn't come in faith; he never spoke a word. He never asked to be healed. He had just wandered into the synagogue. But in Jesus God acted on him and changed his life. Beware of the Power of God.

It was very much a convention at that time; you find accounts in literature outside the Bible, of an understanding that there was a division between a person and an evil spirit within them. I have to be careful here, but perhaps the nearest parallel today is some examples of some people with the illness of schizophrenia. In less extreme circumstances, today we sometimes try to justify ourselves, if we have done something wrong, with the words, 'Something told me to do it'. Here the voice cries

out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?' This is not the voice of the man, but the evil spirit within him.

Then Mark tells us that the evil spirit had special, unique insight. It knew something that no one else present knew. First it knew that Jesus' mission was to overcome evil, then the voice said, 'I know who you are, the Holy One of God'. There is a sort of understanding in the Gospels that the powers of evil are far quicker at identifying the presence of God than ordinary people. We have already read that as soon as Jesus had entered the wilderness he had been latched onto by Satan. Evil recognises the power of good. Jesus' cover is blown.

One of the mysteries of Mark's Gospel is that Jesus does the things of God but often seems to try to hide his true identity. Some people have suggested that he did not want to become a 'celebrity', but I think that is a very 21st century reading of the Gospels.

I find more convincing the theological understanding that Jesus, at least in Mark's perception; Jesus wanted his true nature to be hidden until it was revealed on the cross. His power, the power of God, is not primarily to be seen in miracles, important as they are. His power, the power of God is to be seen in sacrificial, gracious, forgiveness and love. It could only be fully displayed in what he did for all people on the Cross. Power is often the most powerful when it is hidden.

I heard recently of a friend who attended a social occasion with his wife. There he met and spoke with the husband of one of his wife's colleagues. Afterwards the friend described the man slightly disparagingly as 'apparently some sort of civil servant doing a rather dull job'. It was only later that he discovered that the man he had spoken to was one of the top people in the country's secret security services. Power is often the most powerful when it is hidden.

The unclean spirit had identified who Jesus was, so in a sense we are let in on the secret, but Jesus rebukes the evil spirit, 'Be silent and come out of him' which, after a scream, comes out of him.

Now, when you heard the passage read did you notice the reaction of the people? It wasn't, 'What an amazing healing', it was 'What is this? A new teaching – with authority.' It is nothing to do with healing – it is about his authority and power. Mark wants to stress that in Jesus God is breaking in, in a new way with power.

Let me take you back to the student flat in Leeds. Some of you might be disappointed that I was not immediately set upon by an evil spirit, but I'm glad to say I wasn't. I asked the students what had happened and they pointed towards a cupboard. 'It was in there, it flew out at us.' I gingerly opened the cupboard, and it was empty apart from some pieces of paper. 'It was in them', they said. So I lit a candle, placed it in the middle of the floor and invited them to kneel with me. I prayed and burned the pieces of paper in the flame. We prayed some more asking for the power of God in Jesus Christ to lift from them any sense of an evil power. After a few minutes the atmosphere in the room changed. They visibly relaxed and calmed down, and then they were happy for me to leave them. In fact the following Sunday they came to the church to thank me.

I make no judgements about what those two young men experienced, and I do not claim that what I did was in any way an exorcism. But I am aware that the situation was healed by the power of God in prayer.

I entitled this sermon, 'Beware of the Power of God'. You might respond, 'Why should we beware, surely we rejoice in the power of God? But look at it this way. You often see signs on people's gates that say, 'Beware of the Dog', or on road-works, 'Beware – Deep excavations'. The notices are warning you, Beware, Beware there is a power there – to attack you and bite your leg, or if you trespass you will fall into a deep hole. Mark is saying to us his readers be-aware. In Jesus God has unleashed a new power, 'devils fear and fly'. And that power is no respecter of persons. As with the man in the gospel passage – he didn't ask to be healed. God's power is around you – it can change you in an instant or it can work its way on you over time.

But, finally, it is Mark's point that the greatest expression of the power of God is that which is to be seen in sacrificial, gracious, forgiveness and love. Christ's death on the Cross. It is a power present among us now, throbbing with that same urgency. Be aware of the power of God!