

**21<sup>st</sup> January 2018**

**Mark 1.21-28**

My father has been dead now 22 years but he always lived with a certain fatalism. He put this down to an encounter with a fortune teller when he was in his twenties. He was on holiday at Blackpool with friends and they were strolling along the prom and went on the pier. There was, as there often are on British seaside piers, a hut in which Madame whoever offered to read your palm and tell your fortune. Egged on by his friends they all decided to see what was in store for them for the rest of their lives. My father got his palm read and the fortune teller told him he would have to work hard for a living and he would never see success.

Those words hung over him for the rest of his life, like a curse almost. It was an oppressive experience that I'm sure hindered his enjoyment and expectation of life.

When I became a Christian 35 years ago I didn't want that prediction hanging over me. In Christ I was a new creation. Jesus brings freedom. He is the truth, the truth that sets you free, so I asked the Lord to break any hold that prediction had over me.

Joan Kingham's favourite scripture verse was from John 10 verse 10: Jesus says 'I have come that you may have life, life in all its fullness'. But the first part of that verse says, 'the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy'. The gospels reveal Jesus as the one who comes to deal with all those oppressive forces that rob us of life, that

steal the fullness of life from us. As you r4ead the gospel those forces can be physical, emotional, economic, social and also spiritual.

We are looking at the first chapter of Mark's gospel this month and it acts like an overture setting out the main themes of Mark's gospel. The more I read this gospel the more I see it less as a story of Christian discipleship and more a story of multiple conflicts. In the dominant conflict that builds to a climax throughout the gospel, Jesus' challenge to the Jewish religious leaders and their Roman overlords escalates from his preaching and practice of the kingdom of God in the region of Galilee to the conflict in the centre of power in Jerusalem, resulting in his crucifixion on the charge of insurrection. A substantial part of Mark's gospel records Jesus exorcisms, depicting how God is winning the struggle with Satan and the demonic 'unclean' or evil spirits that have taken possession of the people like an occupying Roman legion. There is also a third conflict in the gospel between Jesus and his disciples. As Jesus teaches them the mystery of the kingdom of God they persistently fail to understand him and in the end, betray, deny and desert him.

The stories of Jesus exorcising evil spirits reveal a fundamental conviction in Mark's gospel: through Jesus' ministry, God's presence rules. God's presence in Jesus overcomes evil, releases people to freedom, and creates a community of disciples who experience wholeness at every level of their being. Mark is convinced that God seeks to release people from every situation where they feel trapped and isolated. Nothing

can prevent this. Jesus' ministry of healing reveals God's desire for human beings to be made whole. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus is revealed as one who speaks and acts with God's authority. In today's passage, Jesus teaches and casts out an unclean spirit.

The gospel of Mark was written between 40- 70 AD to a group of Christians living in a Roman city somewhere in the Mediterranean region. These first readers did not have the same world view as we have today. They believed that there was a spirit world, which was as real to them as the physical world. These two worlds were interrelated. What happened in the spirit world affected the physical world.

We in the Western world live in a materialistic society and we struggle and are sceptical about the spiritual world. Other parts of the world have more a biblical view of things.

Having said all that, interest in the spiritual is still strong in our society. I had a coffee in Stroud the other day and I sat in a café underneath their noticeboard. On it was displayed a whole host of groups and activities and practitioners offering healing massage, reiki, crystal therapy, meditation and other 'new age' or 'spiritual' practices. Many people are dabbling in all sorts of things. There is a hunger for spiritual experiences. Sadly, not all spiritual experiences are good experiences and discernment is called for. The Bible has many prohibitions about dabbling in spiritual practices,

consulting mediums, spiritualists, contacting the dead, practicing divination and fortune telling. And I know in my twenty plus years of ministry coming across many who have been damaged and oppressed by engaging in some of these practices.

I confess I have been brought up and imbibed our materialistic outlook and my default position as one of scepticism. But I have come across enough experiences and people to make me doubt my doubts, as they say and to have confidence in the power of the name of Jesus in these situations. A personal experience is worth a hundred theoretical books.

At my last church in Warrington, one of my members was disturbed at goings on in her house. She had just moved in and she said some rooms felt really cold and icy. She had felt taps on her shoulder and turned around and no one was there. One night she had seen someone walk across the landing but she was the only person in the house at the time. All of this was troubling her and causing her to be unsettled but she was too afraid to tell anyone in case they thought she was crazy. She plucked up the courage to talk to me her minister. I said I'm crazy anyway so don't worry about what you tell me! She also revealed that after she had experienced these goings on she had had a chance encounter with one of her neighbours. The neighbour had dropped into the conversation the fact that a previous owner of the house had been killed in a motorbike accident. They don't tell you this at the estate agents!

A few of us from the church met with her in the house and we had an act of worship, inviting the presence of

the Lord. We shared in communion and as part of that communion I prayed about the loving communion we can share with Jesus in heaven, addressing any spirit present to carry on their journey to the light of Christ. The woman, whose house it was, immediately sensed a different atmosphere and had a picture of a person walking away and closing a door. She had no further trouble in that house.

Mark tells us that Jesus' home was in Capernaum (2.1) and that his public ministry begins in his local synagogue on the sabbath. He expounds the Scriptures, but unlike the scribes – the professional interpreters – he astonishes the congregation by the authority of his teaching (see also 6.2). Mark does not tell us what Jesus taught, but it is clear that the authority of his teaching is seen in its impact on those who hear him. That this is 'a new teaching – with authority!' (v.27) is associated with the obedience that it commands.

Here, at the beginning of his ministry, it is 'an unclean spirit' that obeys Jesus, and the battle between God's creative Spirit, who descended on the Son at his baptism, and the destructive Satan and his 'unclean spirits' remains central to Mark's Gospel. This 'unclean spirit', sensing Jesus' opposition, might have been thought able to win this skirmish, since its knowledge of Jesus' human and divine names was understood in the ancient world as a powerful weapon to deploy (see Genesis 32.27-29; Exodus 3.13-15; Judges 13.17-18).

But Jesus bids it be silent and be gone, refusing to accept its destructive possession of the man who has suddenly appeared in their midst.

Satan may name the man as one of the 'unclean', separated from 'the Holy One of God'. But Jesus' words create a new reality and the man is no longer a profane outsider but is at one with the community gathered in their synagogue.

At the time of Jesus it was believed that possession by unclean spirits made persons spiritually unclean. They could not go to the temple or participate in religious festivals; they were separated from God, family, and neighbours. In healing this person, a surprising reversal takes place; Jesus' amazing power reshapes and restores community and relationship with God.

The nearest I've experienced to this story was when a friend of Debbie and myself got cursed by a village witchdoctor after a trip abroad. He had gone on a Christian mission team to share the gospel in Tunisia but something went wrong in an encounter in a village and the local shaman put a curse on him.

He came back seemingly depressed and withdrawn but as we prayed with him he became abusive. He hated the name of Jesus, even at one point being physically sick at the mention of the Lord's name. His facial features started to change, he exhibited eating disorders over the course of the next couple of months– it was as if a battle was taking place within his body.

We sought specialist help and prayer ministry. As we prayed for him he started to become aggressive with superhuman strength that took four of us to restrain him. After hours of prayer, calling on the help of the Lord, whatever was afflicting our friend had been cast out. It was in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ that he was healed.

Some, I'm sure would try and offer a rational explanation for what happened. But I know it was in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ that he was healed and that this had been a spiritual power encounter.

I, thankfully haven't come across many experiences like that, so you do need to get a perspective on this and not get too alarmed. The Bible itself has some reserve and perspective on the types of things that afflict and trouble us. It is careful to distinguish between illness and tragedies that happen 'naturally' as a result of an imperfect, fallen world where there is disharmony and imbalance in nature, in our genetic codes, where viruses mutate and cause suffering and those conditions that are caused through the influence from mild to extreme of unclean spirits.

Stuff happens. But I do believe there is a spiritual struggle. There are many unhealthy and unclean influences around in our society. The biblical writers describe as demonic the spirits that are out to hurt us, destroy us, destroy human relationships, our relationship to God, our health and well-being. The biblical writers call us to discern the spirits – by their fruits you will

know them. When Jesus starts preaching it flushes out this man who is oppressed by an unclean spirit.

Just some of the stories I have told today, and I have many more, tell me that stuff happens. People are unsettled, troubled, oppressed, deeply affected by spiritual forces. Often, they don't say so because of what others may think. Often, they go looking for help in the wrong places.

The charge of Jesus in Mark's gospel to his disciples was to send them out to preach the good news of the kingdom of God, to heal the sick and to cast out demons.

Mark in his gospel encourages us to put our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy One of God, the name above all names, the one who speaks with authority; the one who has the power to heal the sick, cast out the demons and who holds the keys to death and death's domain. There is power in the name of Jesus.

