**31st January 2021**

Call to Worship

We are called to recognise God’s authority
and to submit to it in every area of our lives.
Let us invite God to direct our thinking and our prayers.
Let us give God the highest place in our lives.
Let us worship the living God.



A gathering prayer

Almighty God,
we recognise that all authority
in heaven and on earth belongs to you.
We pray that you draw near to us today,
to impart your truth and show us your way.
Amen.

Prayers of penitence

A prayer of confession

O God, when Jesus spoke in the synagogue, everyone was astonished by the absolute authority of his words and presence. In today’s world, it is so easy to be taken in by someone’s words or their favourable, commanding presence. We think, perhaps, of people in the media, the music scene and social networks. But, unfortunately, not everyone’s words have integrity or match their actions. O God, help us to discern who to give credence to.

Forgive us when our own words or actions don’t marry with our calling. Help us to speak and act with integrity at all times. Help us also, O God, not to jump to conclusions by first impressions, preconceptions or prejudices – anything that turns us against people who don’t quite fit our expectations of them. Yet you may wish to speak through them. Forgive us when we jump to wrong conclusions. Forgive us for judging. Help us to seek your wisdom, to see and hear you in all people regardless of age, appearance or background.

In Jesus’ name we pray.
Amen.

Assurance of forgiveness

We thank you, Lord,
that you are the source of all wisdom and ultimate authority.
Thank you that we can always test
what we hear in the world today against your word.
Thank you that in you, life’s foundations are firm.
When we fail to look to you,
we find ourselves on shaky ground and prone to making mistakes.
But thank you that when we do make mistakes,
you can help us correct them.
Thank you that when we walk closely with you,
our lives have an integrity and meaning
that can help bring ourselves and others into closer relationship with you.
Thanks be to you, our God.
**Amen.**

Lord Jesus,
we were all imprisoned in slavery by sin until,
by the power of the cross, you set us free.
You defeated evil and triumphed over death.
By the authority of your holy name,
we can now freely approach God’s throne knowing our sins are forgiven.
Praise you, Jesus.
Amen.

**Mark 1.21-28**

The question of authority has been prominent across many news stories in recent weeks. President Biden is into his second week and has issued many Executive Orders to use his authority to implement the platform he was elected on. The UK has passed the grim milestone of 100,000 deaths from Covid-19, and questions have been asked of how those in positions of authority have handled the crisis.

There are also news stories appearing each day of celebrities who have received their Covid vaccination. David Attenborough, Billy Connolly, and even the Queen have released media statements sharing their experience and encouraging others to do the same. Part of it is to try and persuade people who are skeptical of the vaccine. The authority of politicians and medical experts only goes so far in persuading some people – the influence of a celebrity example provides an example of a different type of authority. Why can celebrities often have more authority than those in positions of power? Who are the influencers you look to? What gives them authority?

In this week’s passage (Mark 1.21-28), Jesus demonstrates an authority the crowd were not expecting.  It comes from his words and actions, not from any position he holds.

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 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.

Of course, the authority of the Bible and its interpretation of life has been seriously challenged over the last couple of centuries since the age of Enlightenment and the advance of scientific understanding.

Modern commentators suggest psychiatric illness as a possible meaning of 'having 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. In their way of thinking, good fortune was the result of spirits that saturated the air around human beings. Misfortune and illness were the results of evil spirits that penetrated the human body. For example, what may look to us like epilepsy was regarded by Mark’s first readers as the action of an evil spirit. They felt that the only way to be

protected from such evil spirits was through the use of amulets or magic, the action of a healer, or through an appeal to one who had power over the evil spirit. Hence the demonstration of Jesus’ authority over the spirit world in this story.

In some parts of the world, they still have this worldview, which may explain that growth of the Christian faith in places such as Africa and Asia. In the west the dominant worldview is quite different – more materialistic and science based, and we struggle with these references to evil spirits and seek to rationalise them.

As a 21st century Christian I want to hold to the basic witness of those first century Christians who witnessed and wrote down their experiences of Jesus, but I also want to be open to how God reveals new truth and understanding through the sciences today.

Karl Barth said we modern Christians need to have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Depends of course which newspaper! But his point is that all truth is God’s truth, and the spirit of God leads us into all truth. We should not despise science. Thank God for science and how it helps our understanding of life and can help us lead better lives. Where would we be without vaccines and medical advances? Without electricity and computers, telephones and zoom!

Most people are trusting in science to get us out of this pandemic. Most people are not pursuing in God. But it shouldn’t be either /or but both and. Pray for deliverance and use your God given gifts and understanding to work and develop vaccines.

I know many Christian Doctors who have a holistic approach to their health care, believing that we are mind, body, and spirit. Prayer plays a part in their practice. The spiritual is a dimension of life.

Of course, those interpretations of our human nature are contested – some see life in very materialistic terms reducing us to just a combination of chemicals. Whilst we are, without a doubt a curious chemical composite I think we are also more and there is a profound mystery to our existence and being and our consciousness.

I have a deep respect for all those who work in mental health and a real concern at the mental health effects of this pandemic.

**The Duchess of Cambridge has said the challenges of parenting and home-schooling during lockdown have left her "exhausted".[[1]](#endnote-1)**

During a video call with a group of parents Catherine also joked about her three children recoiling in "horror" when she had to cut their hair.

Asked to rate her maths ability, the duchess scored herself minus five.

She urged people "to reach out to loved ones and friends" if they were struggling or feeling isolated.

If the Duchess of Cambridge is feeling exhausted and she lives in a palace, with a mutli million-pound budget and a couple of nannies, then good luck to the rest of you struggling with home schooling and being told that schools won’t be going back to at least mid-March if the data permits.

Its probably the hardest time many of you as parents have experienced, so go gently with yourself and your children.

It is vital we look after our mental health and there is a lot of advice out there and I reiterate Steve’s signposting to various services and agencies that can help and some articles I came across this week for helping parents survive during this demanding period, which you can see the links to on the transcript of this sermon on the Tab website. [[2]](#endnote-2)

I do think we need to read the Bible carefully and critically and not take our brains out. There needs to be good discernment. Mention of ‘unclean spirits’ reminds us that the church’s language and actions around mental health have often been misinformed and have added to the stigma faced by people in mental distress. With [recent Mental Health Act reforms](https://www.nsun.org.uk/news/nsun-response-to-mhawp) highlighting glaring inequalities, for example, rates of detention for black people are four times those of white people, it is good to find Christian organization’s [supporting good mental health](https://www.mindandsoulfoundation.org/) and challenging stigma. Responsible authority protects the common good and is open to new understandings and treatments.

When you start talking about unclean spirits and demons it can lead to the demonisation of the other. The newspapers are as full as ever of brutality and unkindness, much of which derives from ranking oneself superior to 'the other', often by emphasising the 'otherness' of the other – a small step from demonisation in today's language.

Holocaust Memorial Day was this week on 27 January ([www.hmd.org.uk](http://www.hmd.org.uk/)), commemorating the loss of life in the genocides of the Second World War, Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur. The late Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sachs wrote that 'All faiths must stand together against hatred'. He wrote:

'The world has become more unstable and confusing. At such times people search for certainties. They rally round slogans that simplify, and scapegoats that can be blamed. They resolve complex issues into polarities: us and them, the children of light versus the children of darkness, friends, and enemies, the saved and the damned. People lose faith in the long, slow process of conflict resolution. They lose the very precondition of justice: the ability to hear both sides. They see themselves as victims and identify someone else to blame.'

'We cannot change the past. We can, and must, change the future. For the sake of the victims, for the sake of our children, and for the sake of God, whose image we bear.'

Those are the dangers of banding around loosely the talk of demons and having the wrong spirit.

However, if we want to be fair to Mark’s gospel the writer differentiates between sickness and disease and demon possession.

The title ‘Holy One of God’ is only found here and in the parallel in [Luke 4.34](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%204.34). Ordinary sick individuals address Jesus as teacher ([Mark 9.17](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%209.17)), Son of David ([Mark 10.47](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2010.47)) or master ([Mark 10.51](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2010.51)); only God, supernatural beings, or those with special revelation know who he is, and demons address him as Holy One, Son of God ([Mark 3.11](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%203.11)) or Son of the Most High God ([Mark 5.7](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%205.7)). All this contributes to the gospel’s quite careful differentiation between sickness and disease, and demon possession, which are characterized quite differently.

In contrast to magicians and exorcists of Jesus’ day, there is here no use of spells, incantations, or physical manipulations. And there is no sense in which Jesus is offering a performance for the sake of the onlookers. Even more striking, Jesus does not pray to God, but offers a simple word of powerful rebuke on his own authority. Jesus has no fear that the presence of this spirit will contaminate him; on the contrary, it is the spirit which appears afraid of him.

It is not accidental that Mark presents an exorcism as the first miracle in this gospel. He wishes to make evident that Jesus has come to destroy the powers of darkness. His ministry involves waging war on these powers. (Witherington The Gospel of Mark, p 90).

Ched Meyers in his political commentary on Marks gospel sees this story all about the authority of Jesus to disrupt the assumed order of things. The synagogue where this exorcism took place was a symbol of the collusion of religion with empire – the Jewish authorities colluding with the Romans to protect their power and authority in the time of oppression and Roman rule. So Jesus is coming with a different authority to bring a different political way of being – serving the poor and liberating people from oppression but doing it not by force but by love.

Well, I agree with Ched Myer’s this passage is about authority, although I think his interpretation is safe and rational.

The problem is stuff happens in life.

Most people we know in our society are comfortable and do not need God. Increasingly we get people finding faith and coming to church because they ‘experience stuff’ - stuff that causes them to reach out for God and God’s deliverance.

I struggle with talk of demons and would start from a questioning position if I encountered cases of it. But I also know from experience that stuff happens:

I will be frank with you - I struggle with those who see demons under every bed. But I do not wish for one moment to deny that that some of the power struggles that Jesus had with unclean and evil spirits accord with some experiences today.

Most Christian ministers will have some stories to tell. I could tell you some stories. The nearest I have experienced to the story we are looking at where a man possessed by an evil spirit shrieked at Jesus and Jesus rebuked him and cast the spirit out was when a friend of Debbie and myself got cursed by a village witchdoctor after a trip abroad.

This person had gone to church and professed faith in Christ. He had gone out on a mission trip to an Arab country but had a nasty encounter in a village where the local witch doctor 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 also 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 am 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 encounter.

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

It’s very rare that a person sensitively prayed for does not experience some kind of blessing from God. Bringing someone into the presence of Jesus will always be transforming.

A quote from Walter Brueggemann brings out the important spiritual dimension to healing when he wrote:

Have you ever been in a situation where because of anger, depression, preoccupation, or exhaustion you could not sing? And then you could? What changed things was to be addressed, called by name, cared for, recognised, and assured.

When we pray for people that is what we do – God addresses them, they hear again his call on their lives, his hand on their lives, and his care for them, and his assurance towards them. What we are doing when we pray for someone is to bring them to Jesus so that he can take hold of their hand and lift them up.

As a Christian minister I am convinced that Jesus is Lord. I’ve seen it. Trust him and His authority.

He has come to bring life, life in all its fulness.

**Prayer**

Loving God,
please clean up our spirits,
grant us to be agents of your healing,
agents of reconciliation,
agents of your shalom peace.

We give thanks for modern medicine, for those who help us with mental health, for vaccines and cures.

But also help us to know your peace, offered to us through Jesus.

So, lead us into fullness of life in His name.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
**Amen.**

**Sending Out**

Almighty God, be with us this week.
Meet with us each morning,
and in every situation throughout the day,
whoever we are with,
help us to draw on your strength and wisdom,
that we may be faithful and true
in following the example and pattern
given to us by Jesus.
**Amen.**

1. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-55851099 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. [*https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/z6ksy9q*](https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/z6ksy9q) *https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zrmhscw?xtor=CS8-1000-%5BPromo\_Box%5D-%5BNews\_Promo%5D-%5BNews\_Promo%5D-%5BPS\_BITESIZE~N~articles/zrmhscw~P\_FiveWaysToManageYourWellbeingAsAParentDuringLockdown%5D* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)