

## Year B, Epiphany 4, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2024

Deuteronomy 18: 15-20

1 Corinthians 8: 1-13

Mark 1: 21-30

Amazed?

I wonder, when you came in to church today, were you coming with a heightened expectation of something amazing happening? Maybe you were expecting the most enthralling and spiritually fulfilling sermon? Maybe you were expecting a miraculous healing to happen in our midst?

In our gospel reading, I wonder what the people who pitched up to the synagogue that Saturday morning were expecting? Were they expecting a normal service; readings from the Torah and one of the prophets and a nice psalm of David, a comfortable sermon that would not challenge them or press any of their buttons? Had they chatted to their neighbours about the weather and the price of food whilst waiting for the Rabbi and cantor to start the service? I expect, like most of us, they were not expecting anything out of the ordinary to happen. It was just another Saturday in the synagogue in Capernaum. Or so they thought.

Can you imagine being one of them? Were they so dissimilar from us? Have we got too comfortable and lowered our own expectations, I wonder? If we are not ready to receive and be amazed, to be stirred and challenged, to be healed by God's word, maybe it won't happen?

In the synagogue that day, Jesus was the guest preacher. Mark tells us that the people were amazed by his preaching. Jesus preached to them as one having authority and it was an experience unlike any they had had before. They said it was "new teaching".

As a preacher I am really miffed that we don't know what Jesus preached on, or how he structured his sermon that day. The people must have been receptive to his message, and rather than being cynical with a 'heard it all before' attitude, they were moved and amazed by his teaching. So maybe they had arrived at the synagogue that Saturday, predisposed to listen, ready to be open to teaching, open to God, open to new possibilities?

And, wow, Jesus' teaching included healing a man with an unclean spirit. Was it a medical condition such as epilepsy, an actual demon controlling the man, or some form of mental illness? I don't really think it matters one bit what it was. We can get hung up on these small points, and therefore miss the message contained in Jesus' ministry.

What we can appreciate and understand is that this unclean spirit left the man broken and isolated from his community, and he had no control over his own voice or his body. And yet, despite the unclean spirit's hold over the man, the authority of Jesus led to the spirit coming out of the man, with the result that the man was healed.

I am sure we have all had times when we have suffered under the bondage of 'spirits' that cause us to be less than what God knows is our potential; we can spot those moments when our efforts are diminished, distorted, or lead us to wound ourselves or others around us. Just like the man with unclean spirits, our own weaknesses can be healed by Jesus. The unclean spirit recognised the power and authority of Jesus and surrendered to the ultimate power of love and light and healing.

It leads me to reflect on our own 'demons'; whatever we may fear, whatever habits and actions we find hard to stop, those things that distance us from God but we struggle to contain or cease doing. And as we struggle with these things, struggle to be free of them, life can get hard and quite dark. Maybe those 'unclean spirits' battle to keep possession of us?

Jesus healed the man with unclean spirits. So, we too can be healed and made clean by the loving, healing presence of Christ in our lives. What is currently draining you of joy, that is causing turmoil in your heart and mind, that creates a barrier to living fully in Christ's light? Mark's gospel shows us that when we turn up in front of Jesus, His power can do battle for us and help heal us.

This gospel reading is ideal for experiencing using Lectio Divina. The process of contemplating the text and reading it through several times. And then becoming part of the story.

Becoming someone walking that Saturday into the synagogue. What was I thinking about? What was I expecting? What troubles weighed me down, that preoccupied my mind?

Becoming someone in the synagogue who heard Jesus preaching, saw Him healing the man with the unclean spirit. How did that feel? What did it awaken in you? What do you yearn that Jesus would heal in you? What would you like to say to Jesus? What prayer would you offer to God?

This short gospel story is packed full of points to reflect on. What I came away from after spending this week with the gospel story was that Jesus used his authority and power to heal. In the tragedy of the man's life, in his pain and darkness, in his personal turmoil, Jesus was present to him. Even in, or perhaps because he was in that place of despair, Jesus was there also. Jesus healed him and brought him back to having control over his own life, to being free from all that constrained him. The people in the synagogue were amazed at Jesus teaching and healing, but I am sure, nowhere near as amazed as the man who had the unclean spirit, who left that synagogue transformed from his encounter with Jesus.

May we encounter Jesus and be freed from all that constrains and harms us. May we be open to being transformed by the healing touch of Christ. And may we do what we can to emulate Jesus by seeking to reduce the pain and suffering of others in our world, through love, mercy and compassion.

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