

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 95 (94); 1 Corinthians 7:32-35; Mark 1:21-18

What is this? A new teaching— with authority!

Mark 1:21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” 28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

At the start of the Gospel of Mark, the reader is fully informed about the identity of Jesus: the Christ, the Son of God. This insider knowledge places the reader in an unusual relationship with the actors in the story itself. The reader is not wondering “who will Jesus turn out to be?”, but rather, “Will the actors in the story come to the same insight?” and “How will they make the journey of faith?” Apart from Jesus, the only named characters present across the narrative are the disciples and so, with our special knowledge, we watch them stumble towards a recognition of who Jesus is. Other characters, such as the people and Pharisees/scribes react with static amazement (the people) or active hostility (the Pharisees/scribes).

The demons in the story are in a different category. They belong the spiritual world and they know exactly who Jesus is. They serve as an example of the timely warning in James: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the

demons believe—and shudder” (James 2:19-20). Accurate doctrine (orthodoxy) is not enough, Mark seems to be saying.

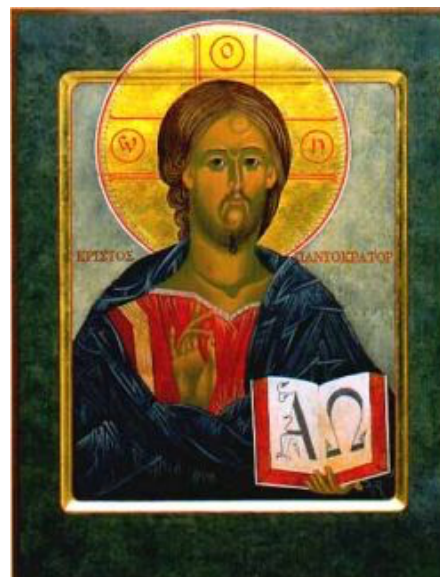
Within the narrative, the demons serve two purposes. Firstly, every so often, they remind the reader of the genuine identity of Jesus, which might be obscured in the whirlwind action of Mark and in the sheer variety of reactions to Jesus. Secondly, they identify the real opponent of Jesus in this narrative—not the scribes or Pharisees or priests or even the Romans, but rather the power of evil as such.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

In the worlds of both the Old and the New Testaments, illnesses of various kinds are attributed to unclean spirits and demons.

KIND OF WRITING

There are two stories here—the teaching of Jesus and the exorcism. The theme in both is the authority of Jesus and the second story serves to illustrate the first. Mark intends to show Jesus as someone with effective power over the forces of evil. This primary focus helps to account for odd features of the story. For in-



Thought for the day

How often do we meet people whose words and deeds match? Sometimes at least, but it may be rare enough. In the old expression, when all is said and done, more is said than done. Jesus is a teacher with authority — not the authority of position or force but power from within. This is suggested by the Greek word for authority *exousia*, from within (my) being. Even today, there are religious leaders who speak from within, whose word is genuine, whose deeds match what they say. These are the one we listen to; these are the ones we would love to be like.

Prayer

Loving God, you love us wholly and your desire is that we become both whole and holy. Help us to take the Good News to heart. May we may be fully mature in Christ, so that our inner and outer selves are one.

stance, in later stories the timing of a healing on a Sabbath precisely causes considerable controversy, but not here, because this is not the focus. Again, a miracle story is only partially present here. Usually, the features of a miracle story are: someone is unwell in some way, the person encounters Jesus, a request is made, a word or gesture is given, the cure is immediate and, finally, some action demonstrates the completeness of the cure (walking away, cooking a dinner). In this story, the man is not really that important—there is no encounter/request and there is no proof of the cure.

Instead, the writer wants to profile Jesus effectiveness against the cause of the condition in the first place, the forces of evil. This is confirmed by the reaction to the exorcism, which is all about Jesus and nothing whatsoever about the man cured. He is not even told to be silent about it—an intriguing feature of later more spectacular miracles.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

The destruction of the demons in Mark

5 illustrates the continued struggle and ultimate victory over the forces of destruction in life.

“Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Legion; for we are many.” He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, “Send us into the swine; let us enter them.” So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.” (Mark 5:9-13)

ST PAUL

Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 5:18-21)



The synagogue at Capernaum. Although the present structure is later, it is almost certainly on the site of the first-century synagogue.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 21 Capernaum comes back a few times in this Gospel Mark (1:21; 2:1; 9:33). The Sabbath is a point of controversy later in the Gospel, though not here (Mark 1:21; 2:23-24, 27-28; 3:2, 4; 6:2; 16:1-2, 9). Synagogues are mentioned regularly in this gospel (Mark 1:21, 23, 29, 39; 3:1; 6:2; 12:39; 13:9).

Jesus is frequently said to teach in this Gospel (Mark 1:21-22; 2:13; 4:1-2; 6:2, 6, 30, 34; 7:7; 8:31; 9:31; 10:1; 11:17;

12:14, 35; 14:49), although the gospel offers only a few examples of that teaching.

Verse 22 The reaction of astonishment turns out to be fairly static—those who experience it seems to make very little of it (Mark 1:22; 6:2; 7:37; 10:26; 11:18). The authority of Jesus remains an important part of the Gospel narrative, leading later to the controversies (Mark 1:22, 27; 2:10; 3:15; 6:7; 11:28-29, 33; 13:34).

Verse 23 In a tiny slip, which may be revealing, Mark refers to *their* synagogues. He is writing, therefore, after the break with the mother religion. Unclean spirits (Mark 1:23, 26-27; 3:11, 30; 5:2, 8, 13; 6:7; 7:25; 9:25) at the period could be anything type of psychosomatic or psychological illness.

In a pre-scientific world, the air was full of demons and many illness and misfortunes were attributed to such forces. Today, we would give another account, while not denying that person is suffering not only this or that disease but experiencing through that particular experience something of the fracture or evil in this world.

Verse 24 Jesus is addressed with his full name as human being and as the Holy One of God. In this culture, names have power (*nomen omen*) and using the name is an attempt to get control over Jesus. That is why Jesus’ first command to the demon is to be silent.

The question about destruction is highly ironic because that is precisely why Jesus has come—to break the grip of evil on the lives of human beings.

In Mark 5, the conflict with the forces of evil comes out into the open and the result is the destruction of the demons. Notice, by the way, the absolutely orthodox affirmations of the unclean spirit.

Verse 25 Jesus rebuked him. This does occur later in the Gospel in a most interesting pattern. Jesus later rebukes unclean spirits (Mark 1:25; 4:39; 9:25) and Peter and the disciples (Mark 3:12; 8:30, 32-33; 9:25), who thereby show which side they are on! “Be silent” will be next said to the wind in the storm at sea event.

Verse 26 Convulsing suggests epilepsy as in: “After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, ‘He is dead.’” (Mark 9:26)

Verse 27 Amazement is also a static

reaction in Mark’s narrative. Nevertheless, the question is an open. The evaluation which follows is accurate—Jesus does what he teaches.

Verse 28 Mark’s narrative is quickly, even breathlessly, told and so very early on Jesus’ fame spreads very widely.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. In first chapter, Mark familiarises his readers with the type of things Jesus did to proclaim the kingdom, the Reign of God. Our passage today touches on two of these, the first being that ‘he taught as one having authority’. It makes a difference when you listen to someone who is clearly speaking from experience and personal knowledge. Remember people who impressed you in this way.
2. Jesus’ combined teaching with healing, and he drove the evil spirit out of the man. The power of God that worked this wonder through Jesus is also at work in and through us today. When have you been freed from some bad habit?
3. The evil spirit convulsed the man before it left him. The path to liberation can be a painful struggle. If you have found it so, who was the Jesus person that helped you through the struggle to freedom?
4. It is not only individuals but groups that can be struggling with an evil spirit – jealousy, rivalry, malicious gossiping, abuse of power, etc. Sometimes a Jesus person comes into the group and drives out that evil spirit. Have you experienced this? Perhaps you yourself have been this person on some occasion?

PRAYER

Faithful God, your Holy One, Jesus of Nazareth, spoke the truth with authority, and you confirmed his teaching by wonderful deeds.

Through his healing presence, drive far from us all that is unholy, so that by word and deed we may proclaim him Messiah and Lord and bear witness to your power to heal and save.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

I say this for your own benefit, to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord.

1 Cor 7:32 I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; 33 but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, 34 and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband. 35 I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This reading continues the thought from last week. This week's reflection is perhaps more experiential, reflecting practical challenges in ministry and in discipleship. Balancing competing interests / responsibilities is part of everyone's life. Dropping religious practice(s) is a soft option because there are—apparently at least—no real or material consequences.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The context in Corinth was given last week and need not be repeated here.

KIND OF WRITING

We are in the second part of the digression which runs from v. 29 to v. 35. Even in English, the passage is marked by the distinctive vocabulary of anxiety, a vocabulary with roots in the teaching of Jesus himself (see below). Paul wants the Corinthians to be “free from anxiety” (*amerimnos*) and not to worry (*merimnō* x 4 here).

RELATED PASSAGES

Do not *worry* about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Philippians 4:6)

But the *cares* of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. (Mark 4:19; cf. Mt 13:22; Lk 8:14)

Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and

drunkenness and the *worries* of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. (Luke 21:34–35)

Cast all your *anxiety* on him, because he cares for you. (1Peter 5:7)

Therefore I tell you, do not *worry* about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by *worrying* add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you *worry* about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. (Matthew 6:25–29)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 32a This half of the verse is really a title, covering the expansion in 32b–35. What follows is *advice*, not doctrine. Nevertheless, the single-mindedness propose has its roots in the teaching and practice of Jesus.

Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?” (Mark 8:34–38)

Verse 32b–33 The conflicting interests of the world (represented by the married state) versus God are illustrated. The language is that of asceticism, how “to please” the Lord. The either/or is sharp but ultimately not dualistic. The reflections really more experiential: *in lived practice* is it hard to get the balance right. As noted for last week, the language here has a double echo: the teaching of Jesus (see above) and the popular teaching of the Stoic philosophers.

In terms of translation, the verb *merim-*

naō has two meanings: (i) to devote concern to (v. 32) and (ii) to be anxious about (v. 33). The key point of discernment is “to please the Lord.”

Verse 33 Here the conflict is illustrated for women as well as men. The comment on being holy in body and spirit seems to be in contradiction with affirmation on marriage in 7:1–5. In context, it may well be that “body” here means “in relation to the world” rather than the physical body. It is clear that Paul thinks celibacy a preferable state for those in ministry (although this is not a law but a counsel).

Verse 34 The summary statement is clear: his/her interests are divided, that is, the person is pulled in two directions.

Verse 35 There is no imposition in this advice. Clearly, Paul does not want to add to their problems! This is all done to make life easier—contrasting good order in faith (*euschēmos*) with the passing form/order (*schēme*) of this world. It is even for their real benefit.

Cf. “All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are beneficial. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything. (1Corinthians 6:12) To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1Corinthians 12:7)

The last word is “without distraction” (*aperispastōs*), which is kind of frame with “free from anxiety” (*amerimnos*) at the start. The first term, “without distraction” was indeed a prime value for the Stoics. But Paul is not teaching the radical detachment of Stoicism but rather the relativity of our concerns in light of trust in God.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Paul distinguishes being “unduly concerned” and being “properly concerned.” How does that speak to my experience?

2. Getting the balance right between conflicting yet good options can be tricky. How do I manage in practice?

PRAYER

Loving God, your call to us is a costly grace, asking “not less than everything.” Help us to respond in our different situations in life that we may find a way to have you at the centre of all that we do. We may our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me

Deut 18:15 The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. 16 This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." 17 Then the LORD replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. 18 I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. 19 Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. 20 But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die."

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Further out in Mark's Gospel, the question of Jesus' identity arises twice, once on the lips of Herod Antipas (Mk 6:14-16) and then on the lips of Jesus himself (8:27-29).

The expectation that an Elijah-like figure would precede the Messiah came from the prophet Malachi: *Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.* (Mal 4:5-6) The expectation of a Moses-like figure comes from our passage in Deuteronomy 18. This future reading is part of the inheritance of early Judaism and Christianity. But first of all, the passage must be read for itself to see what it said at the time of writing.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The book of Deuteronomy is presented as an enormous Farewell Discourse, a kind of writing and reflection familiar to us from John 14-17. The common situation in almost all of these instances of "last will and testament" is that of a prominent person who gathers his followers (children, disciples, or the entire nation of Israel, as here) just before his death or departure to give them final instructions which will help them after he is gone. Overall, the book of Deuteronomy has this shape:

1:1-4:43 Introduction
4:44-28:68 Law-giving in Moab
29-32 Covenant in Moab
33 Covenant blessings
34 Death of Moses

Within the *Deuteronomistic Code* in 12:1-26:19, there is a subsection under "Honour your father and mother" 16:18-18:22. The issue of honouring authority is extended to include other figures in the community. In particular, Deut 18:9-22 deals with the question of prophets and how to assess them. The brief section should be read as whole.

KIND OF WRITING

Deut 18:9-22 is an exhortation and a warning. It is an exhortation not to fall into the practices of the Canaanites, which are listed in detail. On foot of that, there is a promise that God will indeed continue to speak to his people through prophet(s). The only challenge will be to know which prophets truly speak on behalf of God and which do not. (It would have been better to have added vv.21 and 22 to the reading in order to make this link with the Gospel even more obvious.)

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel. (Deuteronomy 34:10-12)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 15 This is to indicate that God will indeed continue to communicate with his people, but not through mechanical means such a divination etc. At this point in Deuteronomy, the figure of the prophet is "re-written", specifically as a spokesperson for the Law, the Torah, and as a result Moses becomes the paradigmatic prophet. The meaning of the singular here is plural: God will continue to raise up for you... The prophet is a mediator of the God's word, not a diviner.

Verse 16 This is to remind the Israelites of their own desire not to meet God "directly" but through the mediation of a prophet.

Verse 17 God himself approved such a sentiment. Cf. Ex 20:18-21.

Verse 18 God will chose and enable the prophetic figure. The contrast is with prophetic diviners who by divination discover or invent a communication from God. Israelite prophecy is quite different. The description here is very like the call narrative of Jeremiah (Jer 1:9; cf. Ezek 2:9-3:3).

Verse 19 People are to attend to such accredited figures...otherwise!

There is an issue of figures who claim to speak from God...how can you tell and what will become of false prophets. Two criteria are offered: if the prophet does not offer God's word, then he is false. If what the prophet says does not come to pass, then he is a false prophet (vv.21-22)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. When have you experienced "a word of God" through another human being, either in person or in writing? How did you know it was authentic and how did you react?

2. Listening is a huge challenge, even on the ordinary, everyday level. Listening "out" for word of God, for discernment and call, is even more challenging. Go back over your own experience of trying to hear what "the Spirit is saying to the churches." Can you recall some particular occasion or crossroads where this really made a difference?

3. Karl Rahner once wrote a book with the title *Hearers of the Word*. He meant that the human being is that creature who is open to the question of God as the ground of our being, a God whose word calls us into relationship. We are at our most human when we are open to God. Have you known that in our own experience?

PRAYER

God of love, you speak to us through the gifts and words of others. Give us "ears of the heart" that we may not let your word fall to the ground. Open not only our ears, but our hearts and our lives, that the seed of your word may bear in us a rich harvest.

THE LITURGY

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 95 (94); 1 Corinthians 7:32-35; Mark 1:21-18

READINGS 1 AND 3

In the Gospel, Jesus is described as an effective teacher, whose word causes things to happen. Such effectiveness is one of the criteria offered in Deut 18 for telling apart true and false prophets.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The excerpts from Psalm 95 (94) constitute an exhortation to listen, picking up directly on v.19 of the reading. This requirement of listening is realistically presented in the context of a refusal to listen “as at Meribah in the desert.”

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

When a spiritual leader passes on, the followers often wonder how will they manage. In this passage, Moses’ life is drawing to a close, but he offers reassurance to the people of Israel: God will raise up a prophet like himself for the people. God’s continued presence through other figures leads eventually to the fulfilment of that promise in Jesus, as we see in today’s Gospel.

Second reading

1 Corinthians 7:22-25

With all the discussion we have today about the celibacy of the clergy, here’s the opinion of St Paul, based closely in his experience. He himself was by then single again, probably a widower, and he recommends celibacy but does not impose it. The reasons given should provoke some thought and discussion!

Gospel

Mark 1:21-28

Perhaps in your own experience, there was a particular teacher who made an impact on you. Can you remember why was that the case? In today’s Gospel, Mark notices that Jesus the teacher made a huge impact. The Gospel story illustrates why.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 2 February *The Presentation*

Malachi 3:1-4

We tend to hear this reading in the light of John the Baptist, but we should first hear it on its own merits. At the time of writing, the prophet Malachi severely criticised the priesthood and its worship “system”. (There is no need to read the passage below in italics because parts of it are quite offensive, but it does give the setting in a robust way.) The issues are lack of genuine faith and the failure to live justly, issues which have not gone away. The purification needed is not the tidying up of the liturgy but a change of heart in the worshippers.

And now, O priests, this command is for you. If you will not listen, if you will not lay it to heart to give glory to my name, says the Lord of hosts, then I will send the curse on you and I will curse your blessings; indeed I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart. I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and I will put you out of my presence. (Mal 2:1-3)

Tuesday 3 February *St Blaise*

Hebrew 12:1-4

The writer offers us a moment of encouragement, so that we may not lose heart.

Wednesday 4 February

Hebrews 12:4-7,11-15

How do we deal with difficult experiences, which can feel as if we are being punished? Today’s reading may help.

Thursday 5 February *St Agatha*

Hebrews 12:18-19,21-24

What is our point of arrival, the goal of our faith? The writer says first what it is *not* before going on to say what it is.

Friday 6 February *St Paul Miki*

Hebrews 13:1-8

Practical advice is the message today and always needed! The last sentence affirms and challenges.

Saturday 7 February *St Mel*

Hebrews 13:15-17,20-21

Very fittingly, our readings from Hebrews come to a close with a great prayer for faithfulness, that we may be in our turn an acceptable offering to God.

Amen!

REFLECTIONS

A contemporary creed, from the Methodist tradition

Presider

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is the one true Church, apostolic and universal, whose holy faith let us now declare:

All of us

We believe in God the Father, infinite in wisdom, power and love, whose mercy is over all his works, and whose will is ever directed to his children’s good.

We believe in Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of man, the gift of the Father’s unfailing grace, the ground of our hope, and the promise of our deliverance from sin and death.

We believe in the Holy Spirit as the divine presence in our lives, whereby we are kept in perpetual remembrance of the truth of Christ, and find strength and help in time of need.

We believe that this faith should manifest itself in the service of love as set forth in the example of our blessed Lord, to the end that the kingdom of God may come upon the earth. Amen.

