

SUNDAY 31ST JANUARY 2021

REVD ALAN F. MILLER

4TH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

CALL TO WORSHIP

Come! Let us give thanks to the Lord with whole hearts.

Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Glory be to the One whose wonders are to be remembered.

Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

The Lord is gracious and full of compassion.

Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

The Lord feeds the righteous with truth.

Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Come! Let us give thanks to God.

HYMN I heard the voice of Jesus say

PRAYER

Almighty God, Light from Light,
who commands the universe and all that is made,
your Word is the power that makes whole what is broken,
the force of good, and the food of peace.
Teach us now as you taught in the synagogue.
Heal us now so that in all that we say and do,
the freedom we have in you may be for others, too;
in Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

Psalm 111

Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who delight in them.

Full of honour and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.

He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.

He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.

He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.

The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.

They are established forever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant forever.
Holy and awesome is his name.
The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practise it have a good understanding.
His praise endures forever.

CONFESSION

The One who pardons, heals, and strengthens all who repent
calls us to name our failings and our hopes.
Let us confess our sin in the presence of God and one another.

Holy and all-powerful God,
who commands all spirits,
comforts those in distress,
and casts out destructive forces,
we confess that we are unable to do your will.

We protect what is familiar
and reject what is unknown.
We admire those with courage
but excuse ourselves when we falter from the truth.
We forget that you are always with us,
and that with you all things are possible.

Forgive us, lead us, make us new.
Remove our desire to heed false prophets,
and show us your way;
in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
one God, Mother of us all. Amen.

The God who made you and knows your every thought
hears you now and forgives you all your sin.
You have been redeemed through Jesus Christ,
God's Son, our Saviour, who is Alpha and Omega, all in all.

Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 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." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 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.” At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

REFLECTION

*Holy Spirit, your people call out for understanding.
Bring to our yearning hearts and minds
the truth of your Word; in Jesus' name. Amen.*

In telling the story of Jesus, Mark at the beginning of his gospel cuts straight to the chase: Jesus is baptised; Jesus is whisked away into the desert to face Satan's tempting, Jesus moves swiftly on to call the first disciples. Without pausing for breath, after only twenty verses we reach the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, which for Mark is the most important part of the story – the teaching and the healing miracles that show Jesus to be the Holy One of God who speaks and acts with authority over the powers of this world, and whose words and deeds proclaim the coming of God's reign.

So then that Sabbath day in Capernaum, on the northern shore of the sea of Galilee, Jesus came with his disciples to the synagogue where the community had gathered. Entering the gathering, reading from the scriptures and teaching from them, the people are astonished by the way in which Jesus speaks with natural authority, in a way quite different from anything they have known or heard before. .

Of course, what we are all to understand is that Jesus speaks with the authority of the living God, s prophet, Messiah, Son of God, and Saviour. m It is that same authority which the first disciples recognised when Jesus came to them and summoned them to follow him and join with him in God's mission to the world.

We now take up the story as Jesus begins his public ministry, not among the rich and powerful, not by immediately confronting tyrannical leaders, nor by challenging the occupying forces of Rome, but among the ordinary people of his home region of Galilee.

In this scene, Mark paints a picture of contrasts for us, as he compares the usual teaching style of these learned Scribes, learned in the law but lacking in vision and spirit, with the words that Jesus speaks. We can surely imagine, how these Scribes: must have spoken: hidebound by tradition, fearful of breaking from the narrow prescriptions of the written law, never saying anything new, their words would have been dry, and dull, lacking the power to enthuse or inspire their congregations. And then along comes Jesus, speaking to them in a way that galvanises his listeners with a new message.

What really matters to Mark at this point is not so much what Jesus says, as how he says it – Jesus' teaching has an effect on those who heard it because he speaks directly to the people with an authority that is God's, not dependent on law, scripture or tradition: here is someone who speaks God's word straight to the hearts and minds of those who need to hear it.

What happens next is something that we in the 21st century may struggle to accept or understand, the exorcism of a man described as possessed by an unclean spirit, or indeed spirits. In our own time, science and understanding of illness – including mental illness – and how to treat it, has progressed far beyond anything the healers of 2000 years ago might have imagined. For them, the world was filled and influenced by many spirits, good and bad, which shaped human experience; only supernatural power could deal with these effectively, and restore those afflicted to their right minds and fullness of life.

We might like to think we know better now, but for many people mental illness is still something we find very hard to understand, and because we do not understand it well, can often be afraid of those who are affected by it. If we acknowledge our own uncertainty and difficulties, then we might begin to imagine what it was like for someone in the time of Jesus, and know why those who were mentally or emotionally disturbed might be called possessed, and be excluded from the life of their family and community.

Even then, we might miss the main point Mark is trying to make: this so-called exorcism is a healing of someone that restores them, makes them whole, and enriches their life; this is the power of God to bring new life where before there has been only fear and despair. Just as with the accounts of physical healing, no less is the power of God to heal and restore evident in the actions and words of Jesus himself, and these affirm him as the one in whom God's life-giving power dwells, to give signs for a sceptical generation.

This is a story about authority and power; about how Jesus is able to overcome the things that restrict, confine and harm the lives of the people he meets; of how God points to the life of the kingdom of heaven by giving signs of that life in the here and now. It is a story about Jesus' power to restore people to wholeness and health, and about his power to cleanse people as they are liberated and enabled to enter once more into a right relationship with God.

We learn from the gospel that Jesus taught with such authority that things happened. God speaks to us through the words and actions of Jesus in such a way that those who have been separated from God are reconciled with God once more. Jesus claims the authority to teach and to heal that comes from God, and in turn Jesus calls his church in the present day to teach and to act in ways that challenge the powers of evil and that release people from the chains that enslave them – emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

Called to restore and to build up individuals and communities, congregations and churches. Today's reading is a challenge to the whole people of God in the world to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ and the reign of God through prophetic words and actions. In this way God's kingdom is made known, and God's love for the world is shown.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Let us pray for the needs of the world, saying,
Hear us, O God, your mercy is great.
For the healing of Earth and all its creatures;
hear us, O God, **your mercy is great.**

For the church's willingness to cast out demons in its midst,
for congregations that are in turmoil,
for the healing of divisions between the followers of Christ Jesus;
hear us, O God, **your mercy is great.**

For leaders of nations,
for those who have great wealth,
for those who have too much power,
for those who have destructive weapons,
and for those who have none;
hear us, O God, **your mercy is great.**

For those who are victims of others' idolatry,
for children who have no one to listen to their cries for food and shelter,
for parents who cannot answer the needs of their children,
for peacemakers and diplomats,
for those who give through charities,
and for those who use the law
to make policies for the greater good;
hear us, O God, **your mercy is great.**

For all who are in pain and in need of care,
especially those we name now aloud or silently, . . .
[A time of silence is kept.]
hear us, O God, **your mercy is great.**

For the wisdom to fear you rightly,
the power to withstand changes in our own lives
that bring us closer to you,
for the ability to give thanks for the people
who have brought us to this time—
our ancestors, teachers, pastors, and the martyrs of every age;
hear us, O God, **your mercy is great.**

Into your hands we commend all those for whom we pray
and those it would be easy to forget.
We ask your blessing on all your people,
that we may come at last to the truth
around your banquet table that has no end;
through Christ Jesus, our Lord,

who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

THE LORD'S PRAYER

HYMN And can it be, that I should gain

BLESSING

Go out from this place to a world fully known by God.
Where there is fear, remember the authority of Christ Jesus.
Where there is need of love, give it.
Where there is pain, bring peace.
For you are loved by the One who redeems,
and freed to live by the Word of life.

Go in peace with the knowledge that God's power
is given to the church, the body of Christ,
for the sake of the life of the world.