

MARK = RELATIONSHIP

This year's gospel is the one according to Mark. The key to its understanding is RELATIONSHIP – and that means 'being connected'. Answering life's deep questions will be far easier if we see everything in the light of living as those in association with our good God and each other. The bare details are not enough. Look at today's sentence, 'There was in the synagogue a man with an unclean spirit.'

Our first response could be – there was a fellow in church who wasn't quite right. So? most of us fall into that category. Often I'm not quite right either. Maybe this man called out like the priest in the UK this week at the induction of the C of E's first female bishop saying, 'It's not in the Bible.' Wonder how we'd react with a mentally ill guy shouting in church? Perhaps we'd usher him out and tell him where to find help, then go back inside. The interesting thing about this fellow is that he knew exactly who Jesus was. He says to Jesus, 'What are you going to do with people like me? Are you going to destroy us?'

Jesus tells him to be quiet and then calls the voice and inner demon of the man to get out. The man is silent and obviously in his right mind. Mark does not tell us a thing about what Jesus taught that day. He's more interested in what happened between Jesus and the out-of-place man.

Some are more interested in the practice of exorcism i.e. casting out demons than in the bigger picture. The book of Acts tells us that there were Jewish exorcists who roamed the country. In Jesus time this was 'par for the course'. A bit like magicians travelling the world today. The people of Jesus' world believed that evil was constantly lurking to combat good. It is clear that demons in the Bible did not affect people in a good way. When Jesus cast out the evil from this churchgoer, the people were astonished. It wasn't what Jesus did, but the way he did it. He confronted evil head on – no spurious mutterings or magic potions or articles. He knows there is a power of evil – we call it Satan – and Jesus shouts, 'Quiet! get out of the way.'

If Jesus believed in evil spirits, then we can acknowledge evil for what it is – ANTIGOD or anti-good. CS Lewis who wrote the Narnia stories says in another of his books, 'The Devil's greatest accomplishment is to convince everybody that the Devil doesn't exist.' We might not understand demons in the same way that Jesus' audience did but think, for a moment, of the daily servings of horror stories from across our world.

In the oldest baptismal services we have, they begin with words not addressed to God but to Satan. 'Dost thou renounce the Devil and all his angels, and all his service and all his pride?' The forces of evil are meant to be faced, and renounced and fought against.

Mark refers to Jesus as 'one having authority'. If that's not a slur against the religious hierarchy, I don't know what is. They might have had knowledge, but they had no compassion. As Paul writes to the Corinthian church, 'Though we have the gift of knowledge but don't have love, it's not worth a thing.'

Again, being a follower of Christ means to be in close relationship with God and with each other.

The miracle in this passage is not the point. It's about being forgiven and cleansed from the power of evil. As we read Mark this year, let's not concentrate on the miracles but on the person of Jesus around whom these extraordinary things happened. The stories will change us bit by bit if we allow the Son of God to make a difference in the details of our lives.

Want to feel more confident about the future? Want to know what best to do and be for your kids and 'grandies'? Want to live better than we do now? Want to be at peace?

Read Mark and look for Jesus in the writing; put yourself on the edge of the crowd and watch and pray. We'll find that our relationship with him is not 'airy-fairy' but down-to-earth and downright heavenly.

May it be so, for His name's sake.

AMEN

Luke 1: 21 – 28



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