

Sunday 31 January 2021

A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany.

Readings: [Deuteronomy 18.15-20](#), [1 Corinthians 8.1-13](#), [Mark 1.21-28](#)

The season of Epiphany is a season of revelation. That's what the Greek word that has given its name to this time of the church's year means. During the six weeks of Epiphany, we deliberately read parts of Scripture that describe how Jesus is being revealed to be the Saviour of the world, the one sent to save all people. The stories we read that remind that people from all walks of life and all faiths come to Jesus to discover in their encounter with him that God's will for this world is to be saved and to be at peace. Discover that God seeks to save the world by calling people back to his friendship, cleansing us from sin, freeing us from oppression and giving us new lives.

This gradual revelation starts right at the beginning of this season: the three wise men, come to pay homage to the newborn child in the manger stand for the nations of the world. Attracted by God's radiant light, people from across the globe make their way to see for themselves the work of God among us. And having witnessed God's work, to worship God and pay him homage. Likewise, the people who see Jesus baptised see and hear God's affirmation that here was his beloved Son. God's Son, with whom God is well pleased, is washed so that our sins may be washed away too. And having seen the sinless One washed, they bring their own sins to God, and are themselves baptised by John in the river Jordan as assurance of forgiveness.

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Today's gospel reading takes us to the town where Jesus lived during his adult years, Capernaum. We read in the gospels that Jesus owned a home there. It is there, on the shores of Lake Galilee, that he called his first disciples. Two pairs of brothers: Simon and Andrew, James and John. Men among whom he had lived, whom he now called from their occupation of trawling the Lake for fish, to captivate people for God. Model for others the good news, that God calls people to leave behind their past, and instead enter into his new life. And now, at the end of the first week of his public ministry, Jesus and his newly-called followers attend the local Synagogue, and Jesus teaches the people among whom he had lived. 'They were astounded at his teaching', we read, because 'he taught them with authority'. Jesus grants them not only glimpses into God's word, but also reveals glimpses of the authority of the Son of God who is expounding the Scriptures for them.

The gospel of Mark, which we will be studying in depth this year through our gospel readings, is generally thought to be the first account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Like this season of the church's year, Mark's story is in itself a story of gradual revelation. We, his readers, who read his book from the beginning to the end, have the advantage of knowing the true identity of Jesus right from the start of his gospel: 'the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' are after all the first words we read in Mark's record (Mark 1.1).

The friends and family of Jesus, the people in his home town Capernaum, even his disciples, however, take much longer to grasp the true identity of their friend, brother, neighbour and teacher. They are given glimpses of the divine reality breaking through into their lives; through Jesus' teaching, through his calling them to an unsettled life, through his signs of power and his healings. Only very gradually do they come to realise what Simon later voices: 'you are the Christ, the Messiah' (Mark 8.29).

There are players in Mark's story, though, who, from the very beginning know full well who Jesus is and what he stands for. Who know him to be God's Son, sent to call people to have their lives changed for good and for God. And one such player makes his appearance in today's gospel reading. The people of Capernaum may have thought that person deranged, confused, disruptive, and therefore best silenced. But while he is certainly disruptive, he is equally clear about Jesus' identity.

The powers of evil, Mark tells us in his story of Jesus, know full well who Jesus is. Just as the heavens tore open at his baptism to allow people to witness the Holy Spirit's affirmation that here was God's Son, so the man whom Mark describes as having an unclean spirit tears open our story to affirm that this is indeed so. 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth', the man with the unclean spirit demands of Jesus. And confesses in mortal fear, 'I know who you are, the Holy One of God'.

This confession of Jesus as the Holy One of God is the polar opposite of Peter's confession later in the gospel story. The unclean spirit does not believe in Jesus, whereas Peter does. But the unclean spirit nevertheless sees Jesus for who he really is; it knows his mandate, authority and power. 'Have you come to destroy us?', the unclean spirit screams. And in the healing that takes place next the power of heaven break through once more, and the divine will is revealed.

In God's house, having opened God's word, Jesus is confronted by the forces of darkness that oppose and disfigure God's good creation. The man standing before Jesus is held in thrall by the unclean spirit, his life disturbed and disabled. That spirit, we read, causes the man to convulse and cry out. And Jesus faces the man, and the power that binds him, and commands the spirit to set the man free.

Jesus rebukes the spirit. The Greek word *epetímēsēn* -- ἐπετίμησεν—rebuke is used in the gospels whenever Jesus faces a challenge to his spiritual authority. Let me explain: from the beginning of the world, we read in the book Genesis, God's will for this world was to be ordered and good. Anything that disorders and disrupts this will, therefore, was seen to be in opposition to God's goodness. For the writers of our gospel, disorder and chaos are indicators of an underlying evil.

And so, Jesus rebukes the man who had disrupted his authoritative teaching of God's word, and commands the spirit to leave him. Moments after our gospel reading ends, Jesus will rebuke a fever that threatened the life of his friend Simon's mother-in-law. Later on, he will rebuke the wind and the waves that threaten to swamp the boat in which his disciples travel across the lake. Jesus answers the challenge of the powers that know him by calling them out, rebuking and silencing them.

And the man is restored to health. Not without a fight, though. The spirit throws the man into convulsions and, screamingly, it departs. And the people of Capernaum, who had already admired Jesus' authority to teach, ask themselves what this authority might mean: 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority', they exclaim, 'he commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him' (Mark 1.27).

The people whom Jesus encounters will witness a number of these deeds of power. But in Mark's gospel, they are left not much the wiser as to why Jesus is able to do what he does. His fame spreads, and people come to him, bring him their sick to be healed and restored, but the people in our gospel story do not really understand that here is more than a miracle worker.

Even his disciples, although they witness multiple such disruptions of heaven's power breaking through to restore, heal, make still and calm, do not really understand why Jesus has to do what he does until the resurrection. Peter might confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, but he is unable to accept that the Christ has to suffer and to die. And so, Jesus speaks against the human spirit in Peter which sought to keep his friend from suffering and thereby stands in God's plan and, like the unclean spirit in this morning's reading, he rebukes his friend and disciple.

In Mark's gospel, only the powers of evil themselves understand fully who Jesus is. They see him as he fully is: God's Son, sent to destroy the power of evil. God's Holy One, sent to cleanse from all uncleanness. God's suffering servant, sent to break through all suffering. God's beloved Son, sent to show forth God's love by giving his life so that people might have life forever. The powers of evil know well who Jesus is, and fear him. And Jesus knows the powers and rebukes them, and thereby asserts his authority.

Our gospel reading describes how it was in identifying the evil, rebuking and silencing it, that Jesus demonstrates his authority. Jesus engages evil, censures evil, and silences evil. He does so by holding against it the will of God for his world to be very good. Jesus shines the light of God into the dark places of this world. He publicly condemns the darkness that covers our world; breaks the darkness by his own light.

In Mark's story of Jesus, this is made most clear at Jesus' crucifixion. Darkness literally clouds the noonday sun for three hours, as Jesus wrestles with the powers of evil. Giving up his own Spirit, the unclean spirits of the world are bound, and the temple curtain – the symbol of God's separateness, the barrier that shielded the temple clergy from God's holiness – is torn in two.

God's holiness, Mark tells us, floods the world most fully when the powers of evil are bound at the cross, and the nations confess Jesus as the Son of God: 'Truly, this man was God's Son', the gentile centurion commanding the cohort that crucified Jesus promptly confesses as Jesus breathes his last (Mark 15.39).

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This week, in particular, with its poignant commemorations of past evils – the genocide in our own nation against First Nations Australians, and the genocide in Nazi Europe during the Holocaust – is a stark reminder that the powers of evil still seek to bind humans to try and subvert God's will for this world to be at peace, ordered and whole. The powers that seek to

subjugate and enslave, sow chaos and destroy, are the powers of evil. They are a polar opposite to the power of God, our gospel story tells us.

As people who follow Jesus in our own generation, it falls on you and me to name and censure those powers, in Jesus' name. A few such powers have taken the limelight this week. As followers of Jesus, it is we who need to name the powers of racism and white supremacy as evil, and instead work for greater justice for First Nations Australians and people of colour. It is we who need to name the powers of hatred of Jews and Muslims as evil, and instead promote respectful relations between faiths. You and I need to name the powers of misogyny and homophobia as evil, and instead work for the proper promotion of women in church and society, and greater understanding of the issues and concerns facing the LGBTQI communities. We, the present-day followers of Jesus, need to name the powers of insatiable consumerism that has led to the ravaging of our planet and the climate emergency we are experiencing as evil, and to curb our consumption fossil fuels.

Where we name the evils of the day, where we censure the evils of the day, we have the opportunity to bind them, our gospel reading tells us, lest they bind and enthrall us. Where we shine the light of God into the darkness of our world, that darkness is exposed and we have the opportunity to bear Christ's light into the dark places of our lives, our gospel reading encourages us, lest the darkness overcome us. And where we name and censure, and shine Christ's light, there we create the space to act, to heal, to restore what has been damaged and broken by evil and hatred, selfishness and greed.

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As we continue on our long journey from the manger to the cross, we are given the stories of Epiphany, stories of revelation, to assure us that the will and power of God is to save this world and to heal his people. Those stories are given us as encouragement to help us face the disruptions and evils of our own time. They are given us as sustenance to help us face the and act against the evils of our own generation.

The stories we read this Epiphany-tide assure us, that we, the people who read Mark's gospel from the vantage point of the resurrection, can fully place our trust in Christ, the Son of God. By revealing his deeds of power they give us certainty that here is God's Holy One: the One who gave his life so that we may have life, who bound the powers of evil so that we may withstand them in every generation, and who continues to reveal the power of God to save wherever people work for justice and peace, healing and wholeness.