

20150201FourthSundayAfterEpiphany

Last week I threw into my sermon a sentence that sounded so complicated in its use of theological jargon that most of you switch off after a few words! Yes, I was teasing you but I have over the ten years I've been here at St Paul's tried to teach you some theology and some biblical studies. I've spoken about exegesis and what that meant and the different ways of doing it.

Today I want to use the Gospel reading as an example of social exegesis. What is meant by that is to help us understand the passage in more depth by viewing it, its characters and events, their behaviour and responses by understanding how they thought socially. You see, this passage deals with demons and evil spirits and we need to think the way they thought 2000 years ago if we want to understand the message of the passage without let our 21st Century viewpoint interfere.

Middle Eastern cultures both then and now believe in spirits, good and bad. The same can be said for our African world, both then and now. The West on the other hand has allowed science and particularly the medical sciences to explain instances of "human beings possessed by spirits" in a different way. This makes the present story difficult for Westerners to accept and appreciate. From a Middle Eastern perspective, the meaning of the story is very plain.

To begin with it is not the unclean spirit and the possessed man that trouble Jesus' audience in that synagogue. These were common in their world. They are disturbed because Jesus is acting totally out of line with his inherited status. Jesus, this artisan from Nazareth dares to teach "as one having authority" in the Capernaum synagogue. His hearers wanted to know who gave him this authority to teach?

As the listeners were puzzling over Jesus' behaviour, his teaching, and his manner of teaching, a man possessed by an unclean spirit interrupted the proceedings by shrieking out loud.

What did our ancestors in the faith believe about spirits? They believed that spirits were more powerful than human beings but less powerful than God; so, somewhere in between.

They also believed that spirits readily interfered (or intervened) in human life, sometimes for good purposes, sometimes capriciously, and sometimes malevolently. They believed to that spirits had power to control human behaviour.

What is interesting is that the spirit who possessed the man in the synagogue is central in this story because he knows Jesus' identity far better than Jesus' compatriots do. He knows Jesus is "the Holy one of God."

Although Spirits are more powerful than humans, much to the amazement of the people, Jesus is not controlled or cowed by this unclean spirit. Instead, Jesus shows that his power is stronger than that of the spirit. Jesus commands the spirit to come out of the man, and it does!

The people now have an answer to why Jesus teaches "with authority, and not as the scribes." Clearly, Jesus possesses powers stronger than those of ordinary human beings. There is a slight variant in some Greek manuscripts of the people's response to Jesus in Mark 1:27: our version says 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' While version 2 says: "What is this? A new teaching? With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."

Authority is a major problem for Jesus' contemporaries (and I can mention in the Church today as well). You see, no one denies the mighty deeds of power that Jesus performed. What troubles them is the source of his authority to perform these deeds. Is it God? Or is it the world of the other, lesser gods and spirits? That question is asked of Jesus when he is accused of doing acts of power through Beelzebub.

In our Gospel reading the people responded twice by saying Jesus was one with authority: when he taught them and when he cast out the "unclean spirit." What was this authority? Both in word and deed Jesus touched people in their need. The people were "astonished" and "amazed" because Jesus was saying and doing something new. He was revealing God's very presence and life-- he is "the Holy One of God" among them. And among us.

This authority also rested on Moses as a prophet who spoke God's word with authority; now Jesus is the One that God raises up with authority-- not just a prophet, but as the Holy One of God.

Three of our readings deal with teaching on authority. The first reading deals with the authority of Moses; the Gospel with the authority of Jesus. Our Psalm says: *all God's commandments are sure; They stand firm for ever and ever : they are done in faithfulness and in truth.*

The First Reading speaks of true and false prophets: those who speak the words God puts in their mouths, and those who claim to speak in God's name but speak words God has not commanded them to speak. Society is often a 'false prophet,' claiming to speak the truth and even to be 'Christian,' but at the same time glorifying war and oppressing the poor – contrary to God's commandments, not done in faithfulness and truth.

The people in the synagogue at Capernaum have not yet decided. The fact, however, is very clear. Jesus the artisan from Nazareth has authority and effective power to do what he does. He behaves not shamefully, out of alignment with his status, but rather quite honourably. And this is why Mark concludes by noting: ²⁸"At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee."

This final note affects the fame of Jesus. The gossip network proclaims new fame – celebrity status, if you like, for Jesus (because he teaches with authority and has power over unclean spirits) that contrasts with his status being described as "from Nazareth."

The Western tendency to rationalize the ancient understanding of spirits is rooted in the fact that Westerners have much more power over their lives and circumstances than the ancients believed they had. Now that's an interesting point. [Rpt] Today's gospel reading invites Westerners and those who think in a rational and scientific way (no matter where they come from) to consider how wisely or imprudently they use their power in the running of their lives. You see, when we think of evil in terms of demons and devils it keeps them at arm's length from us. The evil in our world today that we must confront is more personal and immediate: violence, poverty, discrimination, drug abuse, gangsterism, racism.

Jesus can drive out that evil in us. He says to the evil spirits – to put it bluntly; "Shut up! Come out of him!" The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and of good understanding are those that keep his commandments says the Psalmist and if we fear God, we will hear the Word he speaks – "Shut up! Come out of him!"