

4th Sunday after the Epiphany
Mark 1:21–28

Hymns: 355, 239, 156, 159, 289, 440.

Introit: Psalm 111.

P Praise the LORD! I shall give thanks to the LORD with all my heart,

C in the company of upright people and in the congregation.

P The works of the LORD are great.

C They are studied by all who delight in them.

P His work is splendid and majestic,

C and His righteousness endures for ever.

P He has caused His miraculous acts to be remembered.

C The LORD is gracious and compassionate.

P He has given food to those who fear Him.

C He will remember His Covenant for ever.

P He has shown His powerful works to His people

C by giving to them the inheritance of the nations.

P The works of His hands are faithful and just.

C All His Precepts are trustworthy.

P They are firm for ever and ever.

C They have been made in truth and uprightness.

P He has sent redemption to His people. He has ordained His Covenant for ever.

C His name is holy and awesome.

P The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.

All: All who observe His Precepts have good understanding. His praise endures for ever.

COLLECT: O Lord, Keep Your family the Church continually in the faith that, relying on the hope of Your heavenly grace, we may ever be defended by Your almighty power; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

READINGS:

Old Testament: Deuteronomy 18:15-20.

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13.

Gospel: Mark 1: 21-28.

The Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Love of God, and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, AMEN.

The text for our sermon today the 4th Sunday after Epiphany is written in the book of Mark chapter 1:21-28 which was read in the Gospel reading heard before.

21 They went to Capernaum. On the next Sabbath, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach.

22 The people were amazed at His teaching. For He was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes taught. 23 And immediately there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, 24 “What do we have in common with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are, the Holy One of God!”

25 Jesus spoke sharply to him: “Be quiet, and come out of him!”

26 The unclean spirit shook the man violently and with a loud shriek came out of him. 27 The people were all so amazed that they debated with one another: “What is this? This is a new teaching, with authority! He even gives orders to the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.”

28 The news about Him spread quickly everywhere through the surrounding region of Galilee.

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us in your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,
Peace be with you.

When you're a bit of a historical and military enthusiast as I am, you find that even ancient civilizations had rules of engagement. There are places where you can fight and places where fighting is prohibited.

There are honourable ways to fight and dishonourable ways to fight. Even today, many other countries subscribe to the Geneva Convention including Australia, France, Great Britain and the United States. Even today we put those who break the rules on trial for crimes against humanity. In these and various other ways, we acknowledge that there are rules even in war.

We might be inclined to believe that there are also rules in spiritual warfare. We MIGHT - be tempted to believe that the angels who rebelled against God and became demons also fight fair. Today's Gospel shows that there are "NO RULES FOR DEMONS". Our only protection against demons IS THE PROTECTION GOD PROVIDES for JESUS' sake.

Jesus was in Capernaum on the Sabbath and went to the synagogue. This was pretty normal behaviour for all God-fearing Jews. Furthermore, He taught in the synagogue. Jesus had demonstrated that He was a superior theologian already at the age of twelve when He went to the temple with His parents. The synagogue ruler often invited gifted theologians to teach in the synagogue on the Sabbath. So far, things are still pretty normal.

Today's Gospel tells us that Jesus' teaching was of a higher quality than other teachers. **The people were amazed at His teaching. For He was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes taught.** Apparently the scribes spent a lot of time quoting authorities. They might say something like, *"Here's what the text says and Rabbi Josef has this to say about it. On the other hand Rabbi Schlomo disagrees and says this. Then there is the teaching of the Talmud which says something else."* It seems as though the scribes talked a lot, but never really said very much. - Jesus was different. - He taught as though He was the authority.

Jesus' teaching style was so superior that the people were astonished. This is consistent with one of the major themes of Mark. Jesus regularly astonished people so that they asked questions like, "What does this mean," and "Who is this Jesus?"

In contrast to all the human beings who encounter Jesus and ask, "Who is this bloke," there are others in the Gospel according to Mark who know exactly who Jesus is. There was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, **"What do we have in common with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are, the Holy One of God!"** The human beings in the synagogue did not know who Jesus was, but the unclean spirits, the "Demons" who inhabited this man knew exactly who Jesus was.

Now Demon possession is a strange and confusing topic. This is because of the nature of demons. First of all, demons are evil angels. They were good when God created them, but they rebelled against their creator. The Bible is not clear about the nature of their rebellion. It just informs us that they fell and they are under God's curse. They will forever be God's enemies and they are therefore our enemies.

Because demons are evil angels, we cannot detect them. That means that we cannot touch, smell, hear, or see them. Today's Gospel demonstrates that they can exert an influence on the physical world. It's obvious that this man had been coming to the synagogue for some time and no one noticed, but this influence is only a disguise. They are not physical beings.

Because demons are spirits, the demons in today's gospel may have regularly attended synagogue along with their victim. Who knows how long this demon attended synagogue with the man they possessed ... weeks ... months ... years ... a lifetime. Who knows how many times the members of this synagogue gathered together and never noticed that this man had an unclean spirit. This Sabbath began like any other Sabbath. Everyone came together and saw their friends and neighbours, and everything seemed to be fine. Most of the time, people with unclean spirits don't look like raving lunatics. Most of the time, they look normal, just like you and me. They work undercover ... like a spy and they do covert operations. The Holy Spirit inspired Paul to describe this by saying, **"Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light."** [2 Corinthians 11:14]

The ability of demons to act natural helps us understand the answer to another question. Why are there so many examples of demon possession in the Bible, but no examples in our modern culture? When we understand that demons can disguise themselves, then we can understand that this is a matter of demonic strategy. Demons have worked out that they can do the most damage in our modern culture by working quietly, behind the scenes. It's possible that there are just as many demon possessions now as there ever were, but they are choosing not to show themselves.

This tendency to lurk behind the scenes may make demons even more dangerous. At least when you see a raving lunatic you know he's a raving lunatic! And you can see the danger. After all, If Satan popped up in front of you in red pyjamas with horns, a pitchfork, and the strong smell of sulphur, you would run away as fast as the wind! It wouldn't be very tempting, that would be an "in your face experience". On the other hand, demons tempt us with things that appear harmless. The temptation may even be fun and pleasurable. It might even be something that seems good. Don't be fooled. The powerful lure leads to a powerful trap and slavery to sin.

There's another reason for the demons in today's Gospel to immediately act out. Their cover was blown. Although demons are quite capable of hiding from us, they cannot hide from their creator. When this demon heard the words of authority that came from the mouth of Jesus, it recognized the word and authority that created the heavens and the earth. It recognized the word and authority that commands the heavenly host of angels. It recognized the word and authority that had cast Satan and his followers (including these unclean spirits) out of heaven. It recognized that that same word and authority had come to earth and taken on human flesh and was now speaking that same authoritative word! And immediately the unclean spirits cried out because they could not endure those authoritative words. They cried out not only in agony and fear, but in subjection and humiliation as well. The demons have no choice but to know the voice of God when they hear it.

Jesus spoke sharply to him: "Be quiet, and come out of him!" The unclean spirit shook the man violently and with a loud shriek came out of him. The unclean spirit has no choice. It's no longer in control. It must submit and come out. Jesus is Lord even over the demons. It's just as James, the brother of the Lord wrote, **Even the demons believe—and shudder!** [James 2:19]

The power of Jesus over demons is pure Gospel. Even the most powerful demon Satan himself can no longer rule us. Jesus has come. He has come to expel them and him, and set us free.

The expulsion of the demon in today's Gospel was an early skirmish in the war that leads to the cross. Jesus finished this war with His death on the cross. His death overcame sin, death, and the power of the devil. It's on the cross that we hear Jesus say, **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."** [Luke 23:34] Jesus sacrificed Himself on the cross for the sins of the world. With that sacrifice, our forgiveness and cleansing, is won. Jesus doesn't drive us out as He did the demon. Instead, He makes us His own so that we may live with Him forever.

Listen to the response of the crowd in the synagogue. They were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, The people were all so amazed that they debated with one another: **"What is this? This is a new teaching, with authority! He even gives orders to the unclean spirits, and they obey Him."** Note how they phrase their wonder. The ability to command unclean spirits is teaching with authority! They saw the exorcism as an extension of His teaching. His word.

Jesus still comes with the authority of His teaching even as His Word shows up in churches all over the world. Even though the church is made up of people who are sinners, the Holy Spirit sanctifies us and makes us saints. While we still struggle as saints and sinners, Jesus has given His authority to His church on earth to proclaim and give His wonderful forgiveness to all nations in His Name. We have this authority because Jesus carried the uncleanness and captivity of all nations to the cross.

So, the authority of Jesus Christ comes to us even today as we hear the audible Word of God in our readings and preaching ... as we feel the wet word of God in baptism ... as we hear the forgiving word of God in the absolution ... as we taste the forgiveness of sins as Jesus gives us His very body and blood in the bread and wine. This is the full power and authority of the cross applied to you.

We need the authority of Christ every day because demons still attack us. In many cases, they work undercover so that we'll be tempted to believe that they are a fairy, a fable, a story of the dream time, a tale dreamt up by ancient imaginations. Nevertheless, demons are real. They are spirits, so they never grow tired and they never rest. Their hatred knows no rules. Their one desire is for us to suffer hell along with them. So don't be fooled.

Instead, look to the authority of Christ's teaching. **Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.** [Acts 16:31] It's by His teaching with authority that we are safe from the attack of the evil ones and have eternal life. Amen

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.
C Amen

3rd Hymn: 156,

Prayer of the Church 4th Sunday after the Epiphany

P Let us pray for the whole Church of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs.
Brief silence

P Heavenly Father, Your servant Moses promised that You would raise up a prophet like him from among Your ancient people, putting Your words into his mouth. We bless Your name that You fulfilled that promise when You sent Your Son with the words of eternal life for us to hear and to treasure. Make all ministers of Your Church faithful in preaching that Word, and grant all Your people grace to hear and welcome it with joy. Lord, in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Your Son spoke with power and showed His authority to release from the oppression of the devil those whom the enemy had afflicted. Through our Saviour's mighty Word, continue to free those in bondage to the powers of darkness, transferring them into the Kingdom of Your Son, that with us they may marvel at Your gracious love. Lord, in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Kind Master, You summon Your children to consider and weigh the impact of their actions on their weaker brothers and sisters and so not to live in such a way that they are merely pleasing themselves. Help all the members of our congregations to be considerate of one another and not to put needless stumbling blocks in the way of each other's faith. Lord, in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Into Your merciful keeping, we commend all those entrusted with civil authority among us. Help them to serve our nation and communities with honour. Remember all those in our armed forces and particularly those who minister to them in Your name. Lord, in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Father, You invite everyone who is godly to offer prayer to You at a time when You may be found. Hear the cries of Your children who call to You in their time of need: those who are ill, hospitalized, injured, grieving, lonely or frightened [*especially* / Have mercy on them all, O Lord, and let them take comfort in Your steadfast love that surrounds those who trust in You. Lord, in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Blessed is the one whose transgression You forgive and whose sin You cover. Grant that all who approach the holy altar today to partake of Your Son's true body and blood may taste the goodness of Your forgiveness and bring forth the fruits of faith in their lives. Lord, in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Lord, You are our hiding place. You preserve Your children from trouble and surround them with shouts of deliverance. Receive our thanks for all the faithful departed who have gone before us and now rest in Christ. Bring us with all Your saints to the joys of the resurrection. Lord, in Your mercy,

C hear our prayer.

P Into Your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**

4th Hymn: 159,