

Jesus has compassion on the demon-possessed man. (Mark 1:21-28)

In his Gospel, John tells us that after performing His first miracle in Cana of Galilee, Jesus, together with his mother and brothers, moved to Capernaum. Its situation on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and at the intersection of several important trade routes made Capernaum an ideal base for carrying the gospel into the regions of Galilee and beyond. Besides, Capernaum was also the home of Zebedee and his sons, James and John, and the home of Peter, whose mother-in-law was living with him.

On the Sabbath following their selection to become fishers of men, Peter, James, John, and Andrew, together with Jesus, attended the synagogue service. Since synagogues had no resident ordained ministers, the rulers of the synagogue would invite some rabbi (teacher) or scribe present to teach the lessons. So it happened that Jesus was often invited to address the congregations.

What Jesus' specific message was on this particular Sabbath, Mark does not tell us; but what he does tell us is about the impression Jesus' preaching made on the worshipers. They were amazed, for Jesus did not teach as the teachers of the law did. They always appealed to the interpretations of past rabbis and were particularly adept at breaking down God's Word into any number of legalistic regulations. Jesus instead always proclaimed the gospel of God. He quoted no experts but proclaimed the good news on His own authority. This was one of the first lessons the disciples had to learn, namely, that in Jesus they were face-to-face with the final authority. For us too Christ is more than just a wise teacher or a model on which to pattern our lives. He is the One who in word and deed reveals to us the undeserved love of God for sinners incorporated in His own person. His is the final word.

It is not at all surprising that Satan, despite his defeat in the wilderness, was not ready to let such a message and such a preacher go unchallenged. It was the devil who caused a man in that synagogue to cry out against Jesus, for it is clear that this man was not speaking for himself. He could not of himself have known what he said about Christ. However, Satan and the evil spirit that possessed this man knew who Jesus of Nazareth was and what His purpose was. They knew he was the Son of God and that He had come to destroy Satan's hold over mankind. With his words Satan revealed himself wiser than many modern theologians. This knowledge did him no spiritual good; it only filled him with fear and trembling. He knew that he faced hell and the gospel was not meant for him.

Though what the evil spirit said was the truth, Jesus would not accept its words as testimony. Satan was not a proper witness, for those hearing him could say, "Those are the words of the father of lies. How can we believe them?" Besides, Jesus was not as yet ready to proclaim openly that He was the Messiah. Most of His audience would have read political aims into that word (see John 6:15). That's why Jesus told the evil spirit, "Be quiet!"

Our Lord indeed had compassion on the man possessed by the evil spirit - a most dreadful condition, as we see when the spirit left him. "Come out of him!" the Lord commanded, and the evil spirit could not resist. This brought home to the people, including the Lord's disciples, that Jesus spoke with authority. A simple command - no elaborate incantation - and the spirit had to obey. Jesus was and is Lord.

Many theologians deny the possibility of demon possession then and now. It is true that we today do not identify many such cases. Perhaps the trouble is with us - we fail to recognise them. But we also know that Satan and his evil angels are sufficiently wise to adapt themselves to the times. Today we find their power displayed in the human attempts - usually by highly educated persons - to undermine Scripture and its teachings. False doctrine, cults, pagan religions, science that rejects Scripture - all these are the working of Satan. Since they attack us on all sides, we too need to turn to Christ and to the Scriptures for refuge. Jesus, the Holy One of God, points us to the Scriptures and testifies, "Your Word is truth" (John 17:17).

News was made that day in Capernaum. It is not surprising to read at the close of this episode: "News about Him spread quickly everywhere through the surrounding region of Galilee," (Mark 1:28). This too helped to

prepare the way for Him and His message. Crowds would soon gather wherever He went.