

ADDRESS FOR SUNDAY 28TH JANUARY 2018

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY

Let's imagine just for a moment that we are not sitting in Little Ness church on a cold Sunday morning in January. Instead, we've travelled back in time more than 2000 years, to the Palestinian town of Capernaum, and we're gathered in the synagogue, all set to listen to a young travelling teacher who's been asked to give his thoughts on the day's scripture reading. He sits down to speak - as our teachers always do - and in the space of a few minutes he has our absolute and undivided attention, not only because of his charismatic personality, but because his style of teaching is so forthright, so confident – and above all, so **new**. No references to the wisdom of, or lengthy quotations from, the great rabbis of the past; there's freshness, and originality and above all **authority** in what he says and the way he says it, and we'd be willing to stay here all day and go on listening to him.

But now comes a very unpleasant disturbance. A madman disrupts the service. Such people are usually chained up or abandoned in desolate places, but this one has somehow got into the synagogue, and an evil spirit inside him is shouting "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are; the Holy One of God". Well, we're all afraid to approach him and not sure what to do but the young teacher doesn't hesitate. He challenges the evil spirit. "Be quiet!" he says "Be quiet, and come out of him!" He doesn't shout, but he speaks with absolute authority and power, and the spirit, protesting loudly, throws the man into violent convulsions - and then leaves him.

Well, none of us can believe it, the whole synagogue is buzzing with comments and questions. "What's going on here? What kind of power is this, that a man can shut up demonic spirits and send them packing?"

One of the main characteristics of Mark's gospel is the so-called Messianic Secret. Mark believed that no one understood who Jesus really was until after the resurrection. So, in his gospel we are continually presented with clues as to the true identity of Jesus, which, at the time, so many failed to recognize or understand. Thus, in the brief story of a day in the synagogue in Capernaum, Mark gives us the first indication, the first clue, as to what happened when the world was confronted by God's authority and power in the person of Jesus.

We're told that Jesus' teaching made a deep impression on those who heard him because he taught "**as one having authority, and not as the Scribes (the official teachers).**" At that time no teacher expressed an opinion of his own – he would always back up his statements with quotations from the great rabbis of the past. But Jesus' teaching provided new vision, and new inspiration. It has been said that it **enlightened the mind, nourished the spirit and set the heart on fire**. And indeed, John tells us in Ch 7 of his Gospel that once, when Jesus was teaching in the Temple in Jerusalem, the Pharisees sent the Temple police to arrest him. But instead of arresting him, the police began to listen to him. The result was that they returned to the Pharisees without him and the reason they gave for not arresting him was "**No one has ever spoken like this man**".

Ralph Waldo Emerson was one of the great literary figures of nineteenth century America. A hugely influential lecturer, essayist and poet, he became one of his country's most vital voices. He was a fierce opponent of slavery and political corruption. And in one of his essays he said something that has great relevance in the light of today's gospel.

He said **"Only so much do I know as I have lived. Instantly I know whose words are loaded with life. I learn immediately from any speaker how much he has lived. One person speaks *from within* or from experience, as possessors of the fact; another speaks *from without* as spectators, or as acquainted with the facts on the evidence of a third person. It is no use to preach to me from without. I can do that myself!"**

In the light of that, it seems fair to assert that apart from his obvious charisma, the basis of Jesus' authority was fourfold. Firstly, he taught out of his own experience. In Emerson's words **from within.**" He had lived and worked for thirty years in a village community before his ministry began. He knew about the often harsh realities of life in first century Palestine; he knew about people, their needs and their problems, he understood what made them tick. Secondly, he believed absolutely in the truth of his message and there was conviction in every word he uttered. Thirdly, he practiced what he preached. He backed up his words with deeds. And lastly, and most importantly, because he was constantly in touch with God and had been given God's approval at his baptism, he spoke with divine authority. The prophets had said "Thus says the Lord" but when Jesus said "I say unto you" those who were listening were, though they often failed to recognise it, listening to the voice of God.

Tom Wright, that eminent theologian, says that **authority** is central to the biblical message; that the Kingdom of God is not a democracy; that God's redemptive word of authority calls us to order and breaks through the noise of humans stampeding in the wrong direction! What a graphic picture that conjures up, and it brings us to the second part of the story and the entrance of the poor, demented man. We don't know what his problem was – it could probably be diagnosed in a whole variety of ways in today's world - but in the world of Mark's day any kind of mental derangement was regarded as devil possession. And Mark wants us to understand that evil was immediately threatened when Jesus appeared in the world; that the madman's condition was a symptom of how the world was at the mercy of malign, occupying powers, and how these powers were being challenged, and overcome, by the authority and power of Jesus. And it is significant that the first words of Jesus when he addressed the malign powers were "Be quiet". It has been said that true wisdom needs no shouting; that Godly power can be gentle, and Mark wants us to see that Jesus is the teacher of true wisdom and the source of true peace. He offers a quiet strength which is greater and more powerful than the fears and torments which can so often possess us.

So, what more can we learn from this story? Mark tells us that because the people of Capernaum were deeply impressed and astonished by the events in the synagogue that day, **they started asking what it all meant.** And in his book "The Good news of Mark's Year" Father Sylvester O'Flynn sees this reaction as a very important step towards discipleship. He says, and I quote **"Astonishment and wonder open up the mind to the possibility of a greater world, still unseen, but faintly glimpsed"** and he goes on to suggest that the

journey to faith often begins in an honest search for meaning, or in that openness of mind that sees the wonders of every day life. It's true that this present age of scientific and technical advance can go hard on a sense of wonder. Science can breed the expectation that everything can be subjected to analysis and then explained. But the fact remains that subjecting things to analysis doesn't always offer meaning which satisfies the heart or the spirit. And Father O'Flynn further suggests that under scientific domination things can be torn apart because of lack of respect for nature's delicate balance – resulting in, for example, pollution of land, sea and air which, he says, breeds, and again I quote **“a companion ugliness in forms of art and music which manifest all the diabolical signs of cacophony and convulsion”**. You can't get more expressive than that!

St Francis of Assisi is the patron saint of ecology. Quite apart from all his saintly virtues he is known for his love of animals and birds and the whole natural world, and he is considered by many who understand these things to be a significant example of a person grown into adult creativity, precisely because of his capacity to contemplate things as they are, without feeling the need to own or manipulate or control them in any way. This, for example, is what Father O'Flynn learned from his contemplation of a lizard.

“I grew a little towards understanding Francis in my moment of the lizard. It was in Central Africa and I was basking in a shaded verandah while the mid-day sun beat down dizzily and reduced the surrounding world to stillness and silence. The little lizard alone, on the wall opposite me, was busy. Could I capture him on film and bring back this little bit of an African day to show to the folks at home? The lizard could certainly be pictured – but the total atmosphere of the moment was too subtle to capture. I realised then a little of what it is to contemplate the moment and receive from it rather than attempt to master it. St Francis lived like that all the time and precisely through owning, controlling nothing, he enjoyed the world in a passionate way that few have ever known”.

Father O'Flynn goes on to reflect that as long as we are open to wonder and astonishment we can be lifted beyond the circumstances of the day and glimpse the broader canvas of life and begin to live with mystery. He believes that beauty can serve us if we allow it, by lifting our thoughts above day to day worries. And he also suggests that anyone who believes in God surely has to have a youthful soul...because **God is the one who makes all things new**. The youthful soul is capable, like those in the synagogue in Capernaum, of being impressed, astonished and amazed. He concludes his reflection by saying **“the staleness of sin leaves the soul caught in the cobwebs of old memory and stuck in the routine which sees nothing but the boring sameness of things. Guilt and hatred come out of old memories, but joy and wonder are always new. It's no surprise that this age of technical education is also the age of boredom. How sad – when there is enough mystery in one small garden to stimulate the mind for a year.”**

So – there is much for us to reflect on in today's gospel message, and also in these words from Psalm 111, our first reading this morning.

“I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; he has shown his people the power of his works. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who practice it have good understanding. His praise endures for ever.”

Amen