

“Who Knew?” – Mk 1:21-28

Well, it just gets more confusing, doesn't it? The world situation, I mean. It has to be especially confusing and frustrating to anyone who tries to maintain an overly-simplistic view of world politics and global affairs, because it just keep getting more complex. Just when you think you can tell who are the 'good guys' and who are the 'bad guys', the ground shifts. Take the recent events in Gaza as an example. Israel, upset over the thousands of rockets fired into Israel from Gaza, invaded that tiny enclave and beat the crap out of the inhabitants. The spinning of the situation in the media was enough to make anyone dizzy. On the one hand were the zealous backers of Israel, contending that Israel has a right to defend itself. On the other hand were the images smuggled out of Gaza, showing utter devastation, destruction, and the plight of ordinary citizens.

Digging deeper into the story provides little if any clarity as to who are the 'good' guys and who are the 'bad' guys. The claims of "thousands of rockets" with few deaths or injuries on the one hand are set against the images a few rockets and thousands of deaths and injuries on the other. The accusations of destroying civilian facilities are met with counter-charges of using civilians as shields. What one side sees as reaction to the injustices of being besieged are seen by the other side as radical terrorism.

Sadly, the real truths that emerge from such situations – and Gaza is but one of many in our troubled world – are almost universal: that evil exists and is practiced regularly; that truth is seldom self-evident and often difficult to discover; and that justice is seldom accomplished.

Things were not much clearer in Jesus' day in that part of the world. Roman occupation, 'terrorist' groups seeking to overthrow the occupiers, and the ever and always pervasive existence of evil manifested in individuals also served then to make life complex, confusing, and unjust. Little wonder that Mark, introducing Jesus to his readers, highlighted the power of good in Jesus – a power of good that was apparently immediately obvious even to strangers.

We see that highlight in our reading today, a classic example of one of Mark's favourite techniques, the use of a story-within-a-story. His 'outer' story has Jesus entering into the synagogue in Capernaum on the Sabbath, and beginning to teach. That 'outer' story is simple enough: Jesus teaches, the people are all amazed at his teaching, they profess him as truly speaking the word of God, and his fame spreads among all the people. There's really nothing remarkable about that story, is there? Nothing even memorable. We all know that it takes a long time for someone's teaching to become famous. Famous teachers get known through their students, and the process of training the students to the point where their reputation defines the reputation of the teacher takes a long, long time. So he taught with authority, ho hum. Hardly the kind of reason his fame would spread throughout that whole region of Galilee. Especially when we consider that Capernaum was one of the most important towns in Galilee, being the site of a major toll or tax booth, a customs checkpoint on the road between Ptolemais and Damascus, at the border of Antipas' territory. No little small-town synagogue, this one in which Jesus taught, so why did his teaching have such an impact?

Mark shows us the answer to that question with the 'inner' story, an incident in which Jesus performs a classic exorcism. Jesus is confronted by a man with an unclean spirit, Mark tells us, but it becomes immediately clear that it is the unclean spirit who is both in control of the man and doing the confronting with Jesus. In a short struggle that sounds a lot like a TV superheroes cartoon, the ugly spirit challenges Jesus, Jesus orders the unclean spirit to both shut up and come out, and it does, kicking and screaming. Yeee, wagh! – and Jesus wins. Clearly wins. Jesus easily wins with a simple command even while teaching, just as if handling an

unruly student (ah, yes, that would usually have been me!). This was no knock-down, drag-em-out fight filled with tension, with the spectators wondering who will win. This was a quick one-two-three clash between titanic forces that was over in the blink of an eye, hardly disturbing the assembled congregation in the synagogue, and with Jesus the clear winner.

Mind you, the issue of the man with the unclean spirit in the synagogue raises some questions, not the least of which is how did he get in? Synagogue worship called for ritualistic purity – one could neither enter nor participate in worship if one was ‘unclean’, so the unclean spirit must not have been noticeable in the man, or he would never have been allowed into the synagogue. It raises the question, “Is it possible that there are people today worshipping in church, people who would automatically be included among the righteous and pure, who in truth are harbouring an unclean spirit or two?” As Gibbs would say on NCIS, “Ya think, Dinozzo?”

In any event, that must have initially been a scene of some chaos and terror in that synagogue on that Sabbath. I think any of us would be terrified to recognize encountering the voice of evil anywhere, let alone in a Holy place of worship. The appearance of true evil speaking out loud right here would have many of us running for the doors, which reminds me of a joke from my sister Sue that I used a few years ago. I don’t usually include full jokes in a sermon, but the image of people running for the doors amidst the struggle with evil is too strong to resist. According to the joke, Satan appeared at the front of the church one Sunday morning, and the congregation did just what we might expect – they ran for the doors. All except for one old gentleman who remained sitting calmly in his pew. The devil approached him and roared, “Do you know who I am?” The man calmly and quietly replied, “Yep”. “Do you know what I can do?” Satan roared with brimstone breath. “Yep”, replied the man. “Why then aren’t you afraid?”, Satan bellowed in frustration. “Been married 48 years to your sister.”

Amusing as that may be, it is but one of the ways we minimize the all-too-real presence of evil, and attempt to ignore the impact of evil. We shy away from acknowledging evil, and so I’m sure we would, like the worshipers in that synagogue, be amazed beyond all telling to observe a teacher calmly and with a simple command dismiss and destroy that evil presence. And so perhaps we can begin to understand why the people in that synagogue were so amazed, and so quick to acknowledge Jesus as teaching with all authority and power. They saw first-hand His power and authority. They saw the astonishing power and authority and obvious goodness of Jesus, and spread his fame through all the region.

Would that it were as easy for us as we struggle in the ongoing battle of good versus evil that persists in the world today. A struggle that sees forces of evil erupting from people who otherwise seem normal, religious perhaps, possibly even righteous. We see evil attempt to climb to the top through oppression, greed, avarice, hunger for power, and raw cruelty. We see the impact of that greed on the innocent and the helpless. We still see unclean spirits wrapping themselves in a cloak of faked holiness, calling out, “I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” We are witnesses to a battle that takes many forms, ranging from the clear evil oppression of brutal dictators and their murderous supporting regimes to the subtle, evil oppressions of racism, poverty, famine and death through disease and starvation brought by the shameless grasping for every last penny of profit. A real-life battle that sees evil supported and bolstered by overt actions of self-serving intent, and covert actions of denial, dismissal, and abandonment.

But this is not a one-sided struggle, because the forces of good battle back, sustained in knowing that the ultimate victory is assured by our Miraculous Teacher, Jesus. While the struggle goes on and the battle continues between good and evil, we know that good will triumph in the end because we also recognize and are amazed by the power of ultimate goodness, the

power of God, present in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. We, like the people in that Capernaum synagogue continue to be amazed by the authority and the power not just of his teaching, but by the comfort and strength of His presence with us and His involvement in our lives. We are comforted in this struggle by Christ's love and support shown so clearly in his death and resurrection. We call on him to sustain us as we continue to respond to his call, and struggle to overcome evil with goodness in his name.

That we will continue to be surprised by the emergence of unclean spirits from people we would otherwise never suspect seems sure. But that Jesus will continue to amaze us by teaching us that He can and does exert instant and complete power over those spirits is even more sure. All thanks be to God for that safety and security in Christ Jesus, our Lord.