

“Miraculous Start” – 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 keeps getting more complex. Just when you think you can tell who are the 'good guys' and who are the 'bad guys' the ground shifts. Brutal dictators who were the darlings of the West, propped up for years with money and armaments, suddenly lose favour and become pariahs to be themselves removed by force and violence. Iraq's Saddam Hussein, Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, and now Syria's Bashar al-Assad come to mind as some recent examples.

Digging deeper into the story provides little if any clarity as to who are the 'good' guys and who are the 'bad' guys. The 'Arab Spring' in Egypt just four years ago resulted in what looked like victory for the people – except it now is coming clearer that the real bad guys who have always been running the show there – the Military – are still very much in power and so nothing has really changed.

Sadly, the real truths that emerge from such situations are almost universal: evil exists and is practiced regularly; truth is seldom self-evident and often difficult to discover; and justice is seldom completely realized.

This is nothing new, either ... 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? As is typical of Mark, the story is short, short on details, and even unmemorable.

However, 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 why was it, how was it that he taught with authority? The question becomes especially meaningful 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. This was no little small-town synagogue 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 scene from a Steven Segal movie the ugly spirit challenges Jesus, Jesus orders the unclean spirit to both shut up and come out, and it does, kicking and screaming. Yeee, wahh! – and Jesus wins. Jesus not only wins, Jesus 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.

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 by encountering and recognizing the voice of evil anywhere, let alone in a Sanctuary, 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 some of you have heard before. 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. Without batting an eyelash the old man replied, “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 even 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. 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 throughout the entire 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 much more subtle expressions: racism; child abuse; domestic violence; poverty, famine and death through disease and starvation brought by the shameless grasping for every last penny of profit. We live in the midst of 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.

Yes, it’s true that the world often seems to be “going to hell in a handbasket” as the old saying goes. Much of that feeling comes not only from the media focusing on the spectacular events which are usually manifestations of evil but also from politicians and business moguls eager to profit from fear-mongering. However, it is vitally important to remember that the evil out there is not the only story and that there is plenty of unreported good out in the world as well.

We must remember this, and not lose heart, because this is not a one-sided struggle. The forces of good do indeed battle back, sustained in knowing that the ultimate victory is assured by our Miraculous Teacher, Jesus. Faithful people reach out in Christ's name to offer refuge, safety, medical treatment, consolation, and comfort. Along with them 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. Like the people in that Capernaum synagogue we also 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 daily to sustain us as we continue to respond to his call, and work and struggle to overcome evil with goodness in his name.

The lesson from Mark's gospel and our assurance in faith is that Jesus will continue to amaze us by teaching us that He can and does exert instant and complete power over those evil spirits. Knowing this, believing this, we shall continue to give thanks to God for that safety and security in Christ Jesus, our Lord and rejoice that we are called to and sustained in helping to fight the forces of evil in Christ's Holy name.