

### **“Miraculous Teacher” – 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 hold 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 election in Palestine as an example ... primarily under the urging of the United States an election was held in that troubled country – prematurely, some were arguing, an election closely monitored by notables such as former President Jimmy Carter. By all accounts it was a completely legal, honest and fair election – but the outcome was not quite what the Western countries who pushed for the election had in mind, because the Hamas Party won a clear majority. That organization has views on the state of Israel that are polar opposites of much of the rest of the world, and has been declared a terrorist organization by the USA, Britain and other nations, but the Palestinian people see a different side because of Hamas' providing schools, hospitals and relief to the poor. Personally, if it weren't for the magic of colour television, revealing that one group favours green and the other yellow, I wouldn't be able to tell them apart, for both seem to get off on firing guns into the air, burning tires and cars, throwing rocks through windows and climbing up on buildings to wave flags and banners.

However, the complexity builds for the Western nations, because apart from a military invasion, the only mechanism of control is to cut off aid funding to Palestine, not a good solution at best and made doubly dangerous because the consensus is that Iran is both willing and able to step into that funding gap, a 'bad' thing from the West's point of view, a 'good' thing from the viewpoint of the Arab/Muslim world.

Things were not much clearer in Jesus' day in that part of the world. Roman occupation, terrorist groups, and the ever and always pervasive existence of evil manifested in individuals served to make life complex and confusing. Little wonder that Mark in his introducing Jesus highlighted the power of good in Jesus that was apparently and 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. The 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. Yawn! 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, wahh! – and Jesus wins. Clearly wins. Jesus easily wins with a simple command even while teaching, just as if handling an unruly student (ah, reminds me of my early school days – half my Grade 8 class drove their own cars to school!). 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. 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? You think?

In any event, it must have been a scene of some chaos and terror in that synagogue on that Sabbath. I think any of us would be terrified to encounter the voice of evil anywhere, let alone in a Holy place of worship. I’m sure we would be amazed beyond all telling to observe a teacher calmly and with a simple command dismiss and destroy that evil presence. And so 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 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 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 oppression 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, as the forces of good battle back, and the ultimate victory is assured by our Miraculous Teacher, Jesus. The struggle goes on, this 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.