

# Who is this Jesus?

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany: February 1, 2009

Mark 1:21-28

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There is a question at the heart of the Gospels: Who is Jesus of Nazareth? That question leads us immediately to ask another: What does it mean to believe in and follow Jesus?

As we began to see last week, the author of Mark's Gospel begins to answer this question about Jesus, and about us, in a strikingly stark and perhaps disturbing way, in the account of Jesus' call to his first followers. Without the least appeal to qualifications, evidence or reason Jesus summons his first disciples who, writes Mark, respond "immediately". The writer contrasts Jesus' authority to do such things with that of the scribes whose authority is self-consciously derived from their learning and skill acquired through training with qualified teachers. We are left to ponder what is behind Jesus' authority: the only 'evidence' or pedigree given us is Jesus himself.

That is, until the man with the crying-out demon is confronted by Jesus. We see in today's Gospel that those who encounter Jesus are "astounded" by his teaching. Yet the question remains, 'who is he?' Ironically, it is the crying-out demon who identifies him as both "Jesus of Nazareth" and "the Holy One of God." The first we already know – Mark has previously provided his Name and hometown. The second designation is elusive, yet testifies plainly to an intimate relation between Jesus and God. We can begin to grasp the nature of this intimacy and its consequences for us as we observe the crying-out demon's further reaction.

There is immediately conflict between the demonic and Jesus, and profound fear on the part of the demons, who assume Jesus has come to destroy them. This incident begins a theme we encounter throughout Mark's Gospel: the evil inhabitants of the spiritual realm invariably recognize who Jesus is, and they invariably fear His presence and authority to cast them out and destroy them.

Jesus quickly does His work – casting them out – but not before commanding their silence. This is not surprising since the assaults of evil often involve lies and distracting, meaningless noise. Their departure is traumatic: convulsing the man and crying out with a loud voice as they depart. Mark explicitly writes that all witnesses were amazed, as well they should have been. By what were they amazed? Amazingly to us, not that the man was healed, but rather that Jesus had authority over "unclean spirits". They refer to it as a "new teaching", and without the conventional props. The demonic immediately responded to Jesus' authority; it is no wonder his reputation spread rapidly.

Of course, this story – and Mark's Gospel as a whole – transgresses contemporary ways of perceiving reality. Jesus' authority is not based on anything that resembles the stuff of academic inquiry. And, there is not the least hint of relativism, or post-modern comprehensiveness, or narcissistic angst. Jesus' presence, words and actions are abruptly direct. Yet neither does Jesus appeal to dogma or establish a cult of personality. For Mark and the early Christians such an approach was simply not available. For them, Jesus is the Holy One of God, whose authority is self-actualized, self-revealed. This is completely consistent with their understanding of God's Being. God is the only Being who may be said to self-actualize since God is dependent on nothing apart from Godself. God needs no verification since God is that which truly is, the source of all that is. And Jesus, the Holy

One of God, shares perfectly and completely God's self-actualized Being. For, *(Christ) is the image of the invisible God...all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together...for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell...* (Colossians 1:15, 17, 19). The Gospel witness to Jesus challenges us to break the mold of our conventional thinking. So many questions are raised – more than can be examined in a brief homily.

Today's Gospel confronts us with a way of understanding reality that is all but lost to the smirking assumptions of our times. We ought not simply smirk-along, nor should we attempt to recreate the ancient way of looking at things with defensive nostalgia. The truth is, the stories in which Jesus casts out demons brings us face to face with a form of evil we would prefer to ignore. We can, at times, be aware of evil tendencies in ourselves and perhaps others, although we are tempted to explain such things as products of poor choices, or family instability, or unhealthy influences – all of which are very real and affecting. At times we may recognize evil at work in social institutions and mass movements – again, with plausibility – but our explanations tend toward the sociological. Scripture and traditional theology envisions all of these factors, but something other: evil is not merely the result of poor choices, ignorance and anonymous forces. This 'something' can only be referred to as demonic – the active attempts by that which is contrary to God in the spiritual realm to invade and subvert the created realm from loving and serving the One who made all and is all. It is clear to me that the Bible envisions a reality independent of the created order, yet able to bend and pervert us in ways both subtle and recognizable.

The worst thing we can do is "go Hollywood" when it comes to evil. That is, virtually all the films and TV programs which take up this conflict are nonsense at best and sadistic orgies of violence at worst. I am sure that if the demonic take the trouble to notice such things, they assume them to be comedies. The most pernicious evil has nothing to do with spinning heads and chainsaw toting psychopaths. Most pernicious is the "everyday evil" that generally whispers false enticements, only shouting at us when on the verge of being cast out.

What can we learn today? First, the demonic recognize the presence of the divine; this ought not surprise us. The practical application of this truth has to do with how we make choices. We can recognize the pull of the demonic when we face a choice between what we know will please God and what will please us apart from God. Let me give a simple and blunt example: the next time you are tempted to "skip Church" – your tired, you've had a long week, there's so much to do around the house – recognize your inner struggle for what it truly is and choose that which centers your life in God.

Secondly, the demonic will not leave without struggle. This is difficult for us who live in an instant-painless cure society. We may very well be convulsed – spiritually, emotionally, even physically – when Jesus casts the demonic from us. Again this should neither surprise nor frighten us. The more we have come to rely on the counterfeit claims of the spiritually destructive as a substitute for the spiritually healthy, the greater the necessary transformation. The new, healthier way of living in God will need time to grow deep roots, and we will be tempted to re-embrace the old way of life. Jesus promises he will cast out evil entirely; this does not mean we cannot invite the demonic back in.

A third point is this. The most perverting strategy of evil is to convince us that Jesus' authority is somehow limited. Evil can whisper in our ear: "He may cast out the demonic from some, but not you. Haven't you asked, and what happened? Nothing. Nothing changed, you are who you are, simply accept yourself and your life. Why struggle? He's not listening. Do and think what satisfies you right now." Perhaps you have heard such

whispers. Here are some keys. Jesus will heal us, if he is sought. Sometimes we are not really sure we want evil cast out. As St. Augustine once quipped, "O Lord, make me holy; but not yet." Recognizing this double-mindedness is important; perhaps that is the first thing that needs healing.

Jesus will not heal part of us – examples being an addictive or compulsive behavior – in isolation. Jesus intends to heal the whole person. Sometimes we want healing to be for a specific problem but we want Jesus to keep his hands off the other bits. As an example, we want Jesus to heal our anger but our greed and coveting are too dear to us. This is a way of trying to control God which is clearly impossible. Healing in one part of our minds, souls and bodies will affect everything else.

Lastly, for many of us healing from the demonic assaults is not a one-shot deal, but a daily, continuing seeking and receiving of Jesus' healing. A casual reading of Scripture may give the impression that healing is an event. Rather, receiving the healing touch of Jesus is a way of living, a day-by-day seeking and receiving of the divine life which Jesus so yearns to give us. So, seek healing from evil every day: begin each day with such a desire and prayer.

Again, this is a very incomplete survey of this subject. Perhaps we can use one or more of the "Called to Question" classes to explore this more deeply. In any event, Jesus is the Holy One of God with authority over the demonic; may that authority be real in your life and my life. Amen.