

Compassion

Mark 1:21-28

21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." 28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Jesus' invitation to the kingdom is radical and overwhelms the vital space of those he encounters. Accompanied by the four fishermen, Jesus begins his "kingdom campaign," inviting the neediest. He doesn't notice the great ones, nor does he call those who pose as the great ones or important ones. He comes to the desolate places, and there he summons for the kingdom those who are far away from the several kingdoms of this world.

So that is how Mark's stories are told. They are short stories that Mark has wanted to present as a model of the gospel. Separately and together, they offer the most beautiful invitation to the kingdom.

In our scripture, Jesus is in the synagogue, a place of public prayer. Mark places the whole imaginable, religious and profane, private and public space together. It shows that Jesus' action is of interest to the human being as a whole, in all the dimensions of life. Christ's activity is not limited to the religious space, but rather enters into the sphere of friendship and goes out, directed to contacting the multitude, to those excluded and impoverished.

In the synagogue, the religious space, the kingdom is embodied in Jesus' communication skills—word and much more—and power over spirits. "They

entered into Capernaum" (1:21). They have left the bank of the sea that is a fishing and calling place of the messengers of the kingdom, and they come to the space of security and tradition, where the old religious teachings are transmitted. There Jesus is, in the synagogue, and in that space of the synagogue he deploys a new power. He takes advantage of the Sabbath, the day the faithful ones meet, to teach them, as a trustworthy Jew who has a word for the people. Jesus' communication skill creates vitality: "he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."

But when Jesus arrives there, he suddenly finds the unexpected; there, inside the synagogue, is an "impure" man. Certainly those in the synagogue are not aware of him because he breaks all the outlines of dogmatic sanctity. When reading the text, we remember many situations in our own congregations where we find it difficult to discover those who are there every Sunday, but who suffer ailments and have sufferings that demand a healing approach of solidarity.

The man is possessed by a devil or unclean spirit (1:23). In biblical language, "impure" means, simply, contrary to the sacred. All that is against the sanctity of God is considered impure. Jesus' teaching liberates the oppressed man in the synagogue. He doesn't name the illness of the oppressed one (blindness, paralysis, etc.). It is simply called "impure": it is dominated by an antihuman spirit, which Jesus discovers, and he makes it speak. This word ("new teaching—with authority," 1:27) defines Jesus. He goes to the synagogue to teach by healing. His gospel is a healing word and action. Jesus has offered, inside the very synagogue, his teaching of freedom, a word and act that heals the human being.

The forces of evil know of the healing power of Jesus' word; they are not submissive or indifferent. Jesus' powerful teaching not only is fresh to the ears of the faithful, but it also disrupts the undisturbed presence of evil. Evil discovers that it is running its course.

We are struck by Jesus' word in response to the forces of evil that dominate the impure one—"Be silent" (v. 25). The verb literally demands an action like putting on a muzzle. And here is where the main idea of the narration centers. Mark wants to demonstrate that Jesus' word is effective, powerful. His word is action, and his action is embedded in his word. The authority is not only in the teaching, but also in the action. The term "authority"—*exousia*—is understood in the strong sense of the "divine power." And this divine power is the one that Christ will transmit to the Twelve to send them to preach and cast out demons (3:14-15). **Ofelia Ortega**

Commentator P. C. Ennis was asked one time to perform an exorcism of a sort. He was serving a historic old church in downtown Atlanta. About ten days before Christmas, the secretary buzzed the intercom to say, "There is a young man here to see you. He says he wants you to bless him.... No, he is not a member of the church.... Says he just wants you to bless him." Well, P. C. thought he knew what the young man meant. He wanted money. They all do, especially at Christmas. Any excuse to get a foot in the door. But the emergency relief office was closed for the day, and so P. C. said, "Sure, show him in." He was not what P. C. had expected. He was neatly dressed, clean-shaven, late twenties. There was an air of dignity about him, no glassy look in the eye, none of the usual signs of having "been on the street," as we say.

"Sorry to take up your time," he said, "but I just want your blessing." He went on to explain in a rather articulate, that he had this "devil on his back" that he could not shake. As much as he had tried, he could not get rid of it, and he thought that if he could just find a minister who would "bless him," the devil would go away. He did not seem depressed or overly desperate, in fact, he appeared in pretty good spirits, very much in control. So P. C. made some feeble attempt to explain that his denomination was not usually in the practice of casting out devils or conferring blessings on people. In a bumbling kind of way, he tried to explain that they really

have not been given that kind of power to heal, though somehow none of that seemed appropriate at the moment. He had not come for a lesson in ecclesiology.

"All I want," he repeated, "is your blessing."

Well, it was Christmas. So he said, "Then tell me your name."

"Andy," he said, and with that Andy knelt down on the carpet while Rev. Ennis had a prayer, which was not so much a blessing, at least not in the traditional sense, but a rather traditional prayer of thanksgiving for God's presence in Andy's life: an acknowledgment of the way God had already blessed him; then affirmation of God's continuing concern and purpose for him; and the request that God would take away this "devil" that was preventing Andy from being the kind of person God intended him to be. With the "Amen," Andy stood, smiled, shook my hand and said, "Thanks." Then he left. Not a word about money or a meal or a place to stay. "All I want is your blessing," he said.

Rev. Ennis has often wondered about Andy, and whether his feeble little effort at exorcism worked. He wondered too if Jesus ever did follow-ups on his miracle work. **P. C. Enniss**

In our scripture the people are amazed, and even perplexed (v. 27) in the face of this authority power. God is present and acts in the world through the teaching and through the word that provides healing. What is this? A new doctrine, set forth with authority (v. 27)! Amid so many voices, one voice finally resounds. There are so many words, but that one is the expected word. Novelty is in the fact that it is word that produces healing actions. That word liberates the earth from the forces of evil and makes our world habitable for the human being; that word guides the church to create spaces of freedom and places of healing and communion. **Ofelia Ortega**

Today, allow God's words have their authority, in this pandemic, God's words still have power and gives hope in the world.

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