

Did you hear what happened last Sunday?

28 January 2024

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

Thinking about Australia ...and what makes this country great (accepting people of different backgrounds, home to the oldest living culture on the planet, our rich landscape and unique birds and animals, the many freedoms that most of us get to enjoy ...

... but also recognising the challenges we face (e.g. reconciliation with First Peoples of this land, climate change, social and financial inequality, not a fair go for all ...)

A CREED FOR AUSTRALIA (by Bruce Prewer)

**We believe that this ancient land
with its unique creatures and plants
is a precious gift from a loving God
whose mercy is over all creation.**

**We believe in God's care for the Indigenous people who treasured it
through un-numbered generations;
the One who grieves in their suffering
and rejoices in justice and reconciliation.**

**We believe in God's compassion
for the diversity of refugees
who for two hundred years have come to this land
looking for a safe place to call their home.**

**We believe in God's steadfast love
for this nation and all its children;
that God is creating a new people from many races,
colours and gifts, to fulfil a high calling.**

**We believe that the best way forward
is the way revealed by Christ of faith, hope and love,
where no needy person is neglected
and no stirring of the Spirit ignored.**

BIBLE READINGS

Psalm 111(responsively)

Praise the Lord.

I will extol the Lord with all my heart

in the council of the upright and in the assembly.

Great are the works of the Lord;

they are pondered by all who delight in them.

Glorious and majestic are his deeds,

and his righteousness endures for ever.

He has caused his wonders to be remembered;

the Lord is gracious and compassionate.

He provides food for those who fear him;

he remembers his covenant for ever.

He has shown his people the power of his works,

giving them the lands of other nations.

The works of his hands are faithful and just;

all his precepts are trustworthy.

They are established for ever and ever,

enacted in faithfulness and uprightness.

He provided redemption for his people;

he ordained his covenant for ever –

holy and awesome is his name.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;

all who follow his precepts have good understanding.

To him belongs eternal praise.

Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, 'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!'

'Be quiet!' said Jesus sternly. 'Come out of him!' The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, 'What is this? A new teaching – and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.' News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

MESSAGE Did you hear what happened last Sunday?

I wonder how you fill in your typical Sunday?



Does it begin with a delicious cup of tea or coffee, or a walk or perhaps some quiet time with God? Clearly it involves coming to church to worship God and catch up with the community ...

How about later in the day? Do you go home and enjoy a Sunday roast or perhaps catch up with family or spend time in the garden or just relax alone?



In the first chapter of Mark's Gospel we are led through a carefully choreographed 'typical' Sunday in the life of Jesus. As we'll see over the next couple of weeks it would be a fairly full day for most of us – a day filled with excitement and people and non-stop action – but also a day that includes God at every turn.

Mark uses this day in the life of Jesus to introduce some key themes – Jesus is presented as a teacher and healer – but also more challenging themes of Jesus openly confronting and overcoming evil and rising before dawn to pray and spend time alone with God.

Mark begins the typical Sunday with Jesus going to church. It was – we presume – a fairly typical Jewish synagogue in Peter's home town of Capernaum. The congregation was also probably fairly typical and small – and divided into separate sections for men and women.



This is the first episode Mark records in the public ministry of Jesus.

And the first thing he notes about Jesus is that he is a teacher.

Unlike Matthew and Luke who focus on the content of what Jesus taught, Mark simply notes that Jesus taught – probably about the good news of the kingdom of God – as suggested in the summary a few verses earlier.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!' (Mark 1:14-15)

But this is no ordinary teaching. The people are amazed and astounded – for Jesus teaches with authority, unlike the scribes. I take that to mean that Jesus taught like a prophet, speaking a message straight from God ...

- a message that resonated with people's hearts
- a message that rang true and yet that was deeply challenging
- a message to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable



Just in case we missed it, Mark repeats the same claim at the end of the story – that the people are amazed at Jesus' teaching and ask each other **'What is this? A new teaching – with authority!'**

But not everyone is happy with Jesus. As will become a regular pattern wherever Jesus ministers, there is opposition.

In this case a regular member of the congregation starts yelling out, naming Jesus as the 'Holy One of God' and questioning whether Jesus has come to 'destroy us'.



Clearly, the person isn't following the unspoken rules of polite church behaviour – but neither is Jesus overly perturbed, as he calmly deals with the situation. But we may well want to ask 'What is going on here?'

The first observation is that there would have been plenty to talk about over morning tea after church! It was clearly a memorable event that Mark is recalling

here. While it may be typical for Jesus, it's highly confrontational. Jesus brings a new and authoritative message – which brings a sharp and varied response from his audience.

Mark explains the outburst in terms of a person with an unclean or impure spirit. Jesus will have several more encounters with impure spirits later in the story. While we may be tempted to dismiss such stories as first century misunderstandings of mental illness, my experience suggests that people can at times be overcome with anger or jealousy or greed and do things and say things that are very confrontational and certainly extremely hurtful to relationships. The prevalence of family violence and harm done to intimate partners in our society suggests that this 'demon' is still with us.

In one church we attended there was a man who I'll call Joe, who started coming along to church. Joe had worked for various companies but he'd had some difficulties along the way. One on one, Joe could engage in friendly conversation and even come across as quite charming in his own way. But occasionally in church, seemingly out of nowhere, he would stand up and start yelling and even threatened the Minister. It was all quite frightening.

Did Joe have an impure spirit? I've no idea – but I do know that his raging and explosive anger was a regular part of his behaviour pattern that destroyed relationships. He was later diagnosed as having a personality disorder, that is, a personality for which, in the 1980's there was no known cause or cure.

However we choose to interpret Mark's label of an impure spirit, Mark makes it clear that Jesus, filled with God's Holy Spirit at his baptism, has authority over the situation. He confronts the person and brings them to wholeness.



Jesus is thus seen to be the 'more powerful One' that John the Baptist pointed to, the one who has authority to free people from their spiritual afflictions as here and from sickness in the following episode.

He is also named as the 'Holy One of God' which echoes the opening verse of the Gospel, 'the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. Mark is encouraging us to ponder from the very start, then, who this Jesus really is.

Some of the theological questions Mark places before us in this opening chapter of the story include ...

- **Who is Jesus?**

Jesus is the one who speaks and acts for God ... and who is also the Holy One of God

- **Where is God at work?**

In this case God is working through Jesus to bring healing and wholeness to a vulnerable and disturbed individual, revealing God's compassion, power and grace

- **Who are God's people?**

Those who listen to and respond to the message of Jesus, God's Holy One

As Davis Lose notes:

'Our God is a God of the broken and our church is a fellowship of the needy. That's pretty much all it takes to be a follower of Jesus then or now: recognition of your deep need and trust that Jesus has come to meet it. ... God does not stay away from us because of our disappointments or fears, but rather draws nearest to us precisely in these moments. ... Perhaps God might also choose to work through us to draw other people to new life. God is still at work casting out the unclean spirits of the world, and God uses us to continue Jesus' work.'

The good news in this story is that Jesus meets us in our vulnerability and brokenness, in the places we tend to hide or are ashamed of, our places of deep need, the shortcomings that stop us from enjoying the abundant life that Jesus speaks of elsewhere.



There is no embarrassment with Jesus – nothing seems to shock him.

He simply meets people where they are and offers a word or touch of encouragement and healing, always nudging the person back to involvement in their community. The person is usually left free of what was troubling them. If Jesus were present today, I suspect he would have had a few quiet words with Joe and helped resolve the underlying issues that were causing his explosions of anger.

The challenging part of this story is that as his disciples, Jesus calls us to a similar life-giving ministry. If we look around, it's hard not to see the brokenness and troubles of people in our families, or those living in our neighbourhood. Rather than turning away with embarrassment or fear, perhaps God could speak or act through us to bring hope and wholeness.

But the true teacher and healer that people need is Jesus – the Holy One of God – and we are called to point people towards Jesus and his compassionate welcome and his powerful message.