

Exodus 19:1 – 6a
Psalm 126
I Peter 5:1 – 5, 12 - 14
Mark 3:13 - 27

Living in the authority of Jesus

Today we celebrate the contribution Mark the Evangelist has made to the church. He was a bold adventurer for Christ and is this congregation's patron and mentor in the Gospel. Each year we pause to remember him and seek from his Gospel encouragement in our task of striving to live out the Good News of Jesus Christ in the world.

Mark's gospel shows Jesus as a figure of authority and action. The reading for today reflects this. The context is a powerful episode of conflict between the religious leadership and Jesus who earned a reputation for speaking and acting with an authority greater than theirs. On the Sabbath, in the synagogue, he healed a man with a withered arm. It was a direct confrontation with the Pharisees who, responded with silence, and then collaborated with Herod's party in a plot to destroy with him.

Jesus' ministry of preaching, healing and casting out demons continued vigorously. And on the mountain he chose and commissioned the twelve. The imagery of the mountain and the twelve means this is a new people of God in formation: called to do Jesus' work, to proclaim his message and to exercise his authority over the demons. Here preaching is not useless, feel good talk, and casting out demons is something greater than magic. The twelve were entrusted with the message of the Kingdom: the word about who God is for us. And they are charged with the task of confronting the principalities and powers – the forces against God that hold people in chains. Ministry in this authority means acting in such a way that the power of God is proclaimed and lived out and, God willing flows to those who experience any form of oppression. In Mark Jesus is the great conqueror of demons. In him God has turned towards us and willed that all people should, in the power God gave to Jesus, live lives that are full and free.

In Jesus' time the people's oppression was aided and abetted by the religious authorities and the political leaders. His social practice broke the spell of the Law and the tradition of the scribes. His authority was a huge threat to their power. Wherever Jesus went people were amazed at the way he set people free and drew them into the Kingdom of God's peace. What he did was an expression of God's saving power. But God's will ran against the grain of the world, as represented by his family's values, the religious establishment, and the political regime. Jesus' ministry reflects the struggle between principalities and powers. That is why controversy takes centre stage in Mark. The argument is over what authority Jesus represents, and which authority his audience will choose for their life. Ironically those who understood him most clearly were the demons he had conquered. Beings who had lived only on the dark side knew what it meant when the light of life began to shine. The others

accused of him of blasphemy. And it is here a profound irony emerges. Jesus' opponents named what is good as evil and named what is evil as good. They slandered Jesus on that basis. But the irony was they themselves were guilty of the very sin they accused him of. They had said the power of the Holy Spirit belonged to the Devil. The point of the discussion about breaking into the strong man's house is that true freedom, such as is manifest in Jesus, is only possible through the one who has the real power – all other freedoms are false and in danger of corruption by human self interest and desire.

We no longer think of the world as peopled by demons, but it is clear people and nations are oppressed by forces they struggle to throw off. We know what it is like when people become subject to addictions. And Zimbabwe is an appalling example of what it looks like when a political leader's addiction to power is allowed free play. And recently there was a spine-chilling documentary about Dick Cheney's part in promoting the war on Iraq. In particular it was noticeable how a lie was promoted as the truth, and the action of binding the butcher of Baghdad seems to have been driven more by the needs of the Cheney family company than a wish to gift the Iraqis with democracy. And while we can see what is happening in the political realm, let us not forget that Jesus found himself in trouble in the synagogue, so what does his freedom mean for the church? What have we done to demean and curtail his gift of freedom for all? One thing that is very prominent today in spiritual and ecclesiastical circles is something St Benedict named in his Rule when he spoke about the Sarabaites, a particular type of monk. Despite their holy appearance, Benedict says: "they pen themselves up in their own sheepfolds, not the Lord's. Their law is what they like to do... Anything they believe in and choose, they call holy..." (*RB Ch 1:8-9*)

If those whom Jesus called are to continue his ministry and live in the power that binds the strong man, it means they have to maintain a focus on the Gospel and be ready to see how profoundly their own issues get in the way. It sounds almost trite to say it, but if the church is going to live in the power of the Easter symbolism it constantly has to remind itself to carry out its mission in the power of self-giving: in the weakness that trusts in God and does not seek glory for itself. It means that in seeking to share the message of God's work in Christ the church will make no appeal to self-interest, will fraternize with the outcasts, will speak for the truth and not remain silent, and will not choose the way of violence or political manipulation. With true apostles there can be no conversions through coercion, and there can be no lies about God. This is the task given to those on the mountain, and it is passed on to us today.

Lest we feel overwhelmed by such a task, remember when Jesus called the twelve and appointed them in his place, the names of the twelve are given. It seems mundane, a detail easily skipped over. But the names enable us to see how the twelve are a diverse and imperfect community no less touched than we are by doubt, impetuosity, and slowness to understand. They had different political commitments – one was a Zealot opposed to the political order, another a tax collector who collaborated with it. No doubt they came with a wide variety of expectations about what they wanted from Jesus. And with the naming of Judas we see that even the community chosen by Jesus himself did not escape the shadow of betrayal. The people Jesus called to continue his work were hardly any different from us. And the political and religious complexity of their context is not very different from ours.

The one thing, the miracle that bound them together, was Jesus' call. That is what made them, and makes us, a community, and it is this, which frees from all else. Free, because the witness of Mark is that Jesus is the strong man. The one able to bind everything that has the capacity to hurt or destroy. If we live with him, we shall indeed be free. Thanks be to God.