

Epiphany 4  
1/2/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Deuteronomy 18:15 - 20

Psalm 111

I Corinthians 8:1 – 13

Mark 1:21 - 28

### A prophet mighty in deed and word

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*A prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people....* This description of Jesus occurs in Luke 24 (v 19) and is part of the conversation between Jesus and the two on the Road to Emmaus. It is aptly associated with the reading from Mark.

In Mark 1:21-28 Jesus has embarked on his public ministry in Galilee where the authority of his teaching caused astonishment amongst the people. Jesus' words rang with a quality that evoked wonder, awe and holy fear. Did Jesus' teaching convey something about God the people rarely heard? Mark tells us nothing about the content of this teaching, only its effects. It was authoritative in a way that moved people to say it surpassed the teaching of the scribes: the professional administrators and exponents of the law. The scribes must have found it very humbling to be upstaged in their own place and on their own ground. It is no wonder they became Jesus' bitter opponents and were the primary group to initiate the move that led to his death.

Mark highlights Jesus' role as a teacher but, compared with the other Gospels, he has not saved many files of data for us. He is more concerned with the effects of what Jesus said and did. Jesus is a figure of action, whose teaching and exorcism form an integrated whole. They display the authority and power of the creative and gracious Word of God that is embodied in him. Teaching and exorcism are entirely in keeping with the Baptist's description of Jesus as the "stronger one" who would come after him, and Baptize with the Holy Spirit.

It is too easy to translate the exorcism in the Synagogue into an incident in which a person with a borderline condition was set free, making Jesus a skilled psychologist. The encounter between Jesus and the man possessed should be read as a cosmic clash between the power of Light and the powers of darkness. When Jesus teaches with authority in the Synagogue the dominion of Heaven is breaking in to disturb the debilitating powers of Hell, which are not something removed from us, but hold us in their grip at all levels of life: the inner and the outer, the personal and the social, the political and the cosmic. When the man says: "*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,*" powers of evil cry out. They cannot endure the proximity of God's grace, present in the Stronger One who lives and works in the power of the Holy Spirit. The evil spirits may be hoping that by naming Jesus they will have power over him, but they do not. He rebukes and silences the forces opposed to God.

This is laden with irony. The scribes, who might have been ready to recognize godly authority when it appeared make no comment and later plot murder, while the forces of darkness, in fear and trembling, speak the truth and in so doing declare who Jesus is. In less than twenty verses in Mark, Jesus at his Baptism is named by God as the Beloved Son, and by the evil spirits as the Holy One of God: all realms of life speak his name!

There is no mistaking what Mark is doing in Chapter 1: he is telling us who Jesus is, and what power is at work in him. He is indeed *a prophet, mighty in word and deed*, and was seen to be. There is a special challenge here for us as church. The role of the people of God is to host the prophetic voice, in all its terror and awe inspiring power. We know that Israel resisted the demanding voice of the prophet. And we know that the church struggles with the temptation to tone down this voice, to distort its message, or to silence it all together. These struggles are at one with the clash between Jesus and the powers in Mark, a struggle that continued to the cross. But it did not end there.

We began with the two on the Road to Emmaus. They were able to host the Word of God. Ironically, at the end they discovered the Living Word had played host to them, nourished their souls and set them free. Nothing we can do can suppress the power at work here, the power of reconciling love: the grace of God-with-us. Although some may find this terrifying, this is the strength in which we live: we are with the Stronger One, and he-is-with-us. This is a resource for real hope as we negotiate our personal challenges, as we wrestle with the chaotic and destructive forces that beset our political and social life, and as we are disturbed and terrified by the cosmic shifts taking place that threaten to undermine everything. We are here to say: the power of Life is with us. This is the power that conquers death: that lifts up and sets free. This is the power of the Word, the Sacrament: the power that makes works of mercy and forgiveness possible in the world. And this power is for-us. Thanks be to God.

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