

Epiphany 4
29/1/2012

Mark the Evangelist

Deuteronomy 18:15 – 20

Psalm 111

I Corinthians 8:1 – 13

Mark 1:21 - 28

Sermon preached by Rev Harry Kerr

In Marks' Gospel Jesus gets down to business quickly after a minimal introduction. Mark begins by announcing: *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* Jesus after wrestling with the devil in the wilderness calls some people to join him and marches into Galilee. His message is: *It's time. God's reign starts now. Put the past behind you, come aboard and stake your life on the gospel.* Marks' readers would recognise fighting talk. When the new Great Leader came to power in North Korea, there were many announcements proclaiming the wonders of the great leader and how the populace worshipped him. In Marks' world such announcements were *gospels*: good news about the emperor. You better join in the worship. As in North Korea to-day if you announced another *gospel*, you could expect trouble. Jesus was not announcing a new religion or a facelift for the old. When he announces God's reign, he challenges meaning of the whole society.

Mark makes this clear in Jesus' first action. He comes to Capernaum, a major centre in Galilee and heads for the Synagogue, the place where people gather to connect with God and with who they are. He teaches. People sit up and listen. Jesus is compelling. He tells them the Great Leader does not control and define their lives. They are now in the reign of God. The limits and boundaries, the fears which control their lives, don't anymore. They don't need to fear the Roman Gestapo. There is more. Jesus is not like the scribes, the official teachers who control them by messing with their minds and making them feel guilty if they don't measure up. God is freeing them up to live with God in the life of God without all the rules and rituals.

A man who is deeply disturbed who begins to shout and carry on. Mark tells us that he is a *man with an unclean Spirit*. A dark and alien spirit has taken over his life. In our sophisticated scientific world we don't do spirits. Our ancestors were very aware of the dark forces all around them which could determine their lives and destroy them in all kinds of ways. The power of the gospel was precisely that people were set free of such spirits. We are not comfortable with that language. We say the man had a mental illness and Jesus healed him. I am not sure that this fits Mark's picture. The man shouts out: *What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to disturb us?* Is he out of his disturbance speaking as the voice of the whole congregation who share his disturbance?

The letter to the Ephesians tells us that *our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.* This week we saw the proposed pokies reform stymied by forces behind our political system. There are powerful forces which have an almost overwhelming influence in shaping our lives. It is easy to bring up a long list: *the military industrial complex, the media, global capitalism, advertising, the corporate world, the oil cartels, religious extremism in many forms, ideologies, stated and unstated.* These powers are not just out there. They are so effective because all the time they interact with the very individuals they oppress. More often than not we choose to be dominated by them. We need security. We need income. We need food and water. We need somewhere to live. These powers promise these things for us if we collude with them and become part of them. We know in our minds that our lifestyle is destroying the planet and many of our fellow human beings. In practice we allow ourselves to feel powerless to do much about it. If we are honest we will admit that much of the time we don't really want to. So there is an interaction between the powers out there and the powers in us. We collude to be comfortable. We don't want to be disturbed.

The possessed man shouts: *What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?* He is really saying; *have you come to disturb our comfortable collusion. The alternative might be better but it's comfortable right where we are. Leave us alone.* The man recognises Jesus. He or they know that Jesus is the one whom God has sent to lift them out of the black hole. He or they try to name Jesus, the Holy one of God. By naming him they could control him, find him a nice slot in the organisation, make him conform and keep quiet. Jesus orders the spirit out of him. Suddenly they see that the forces that control them, outside and in are without power. That Jesus is over the powers. Their new gospel is open to them. They are saved.

Does the story ring bells for us? Sister Joan Chittister, the Benedictine nun, wrote in a recent article: *Everywhere we go, there's a rending sound in the air around us. Something, we're afraid, is being torn apart behind our backs, under our feet, in the very centre of our national soul. Ask what it is and the pundits will tell you that it's the economy or the political climate or global entanglements and free trade. And, at one level at least, they're right. But they stop short, I think, of the real problem. They'll tell you that it's everything except what people fear it is, down deep inside themselves, but are afraid to whisper for fear they might just be right. What we knew ourselves to be—the way we went about our lives, our businesses, our educations, our relationships—is fading.* We know there is something wrong but we don't want to admit it. When we gather in church Jesus proclaims the true gospel we don't really want to hear. The church itself becomes caught up in what is going on. It becomes an end in itself. We offer ourselves a faith that will not disturb but which makes no difference. It's not surprising that abuse of power and abuse of each other of one sort another is being found right at the heart of the faith community.

Now we see Jesus overcome the powers that determine our lives. He invites us to stop, make a U-turn and begin to rebuild the world and ourselves, absorbed in him. That will mean living differently. It will be uncomfortable and glorious, a disturbing mix. I received an Email, yesterday about a Dr. Katharine Hayhoe, a scientist, and evangelical Christian, professor of atmospheric sciences. She has made it her life's work to bridge the gap between the church and the science of climate change. Unfortunately, her faith and career made her a target for an extreme radio shock-jock. He attacked her work during his programme, dismissing her as "a babe named Hayhoe." She's lost a big work contract, and daily receives hate email and threats against her and her family. The Email was to invite support and encouragement from Christians around the world. That is the spiritual warfare of life with Jesus. Not easy except for the assurance that Jesus has already won. I have found in my own ministry that when a church really gets its act together to bring in God's reign, to really get into mission, that is the very time it is vulnerable to dark forces: conflicts, personality clashes, potential splits, whatever. This is often a sign that we are doing something right. A time to remember that Jesus has already overcome the dark forces.

I have begun to read to biography of Aung San Suu Kyi who more than anyone shows what it means to take on the powers even though she seems to be powerless. Right at the beginning of the book she says: *I have never ceased to be moved by the sense of the world lying quiescent and vulnerable, waiting to be wakened by the light of the new day quivering just beyond the horizon.*
