

**Epiphany 4**  
**1/2/2015**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Deuteronomy 18:15-20**  
**Psalm 111**  
**1 Corinthians 8:1-13**  
**Mark 1:21-28**

## **Demons**

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1973, *The Exorcist*: an archaeological dig in Iraq, a young girl, shaking beds, pea soup vomit, a 360 degree head turn – demon possession! Central to the action are a couple of priests, indicating the roots of this kind of story in the church and its Scriptures. While New Testament references to demons or evil spirits are something of an embarrassment to many modern Christians, they seem to be the source of an endless fascination for movie makers.

The demonic in the movies is all pretty laughable, although the chances are we laugh at the wrong thing. What seems so funny is that there are no such things as demons, but it is fun to have the b'Jesus scared out of us occasionally. But what is “funny” from a New Testament point of view is that demons are treated these days as something like diseases. In popular imagination there is no difference in substance between the battle the exorcist has with the demon and the battle immunology scientists have with a new rampant virus threatening to destroy the whole human race – another familiar storyline for films and TV series. The movies are straightforward and moralistic: human person = good guy, possessing demon/lethal virus = bad guy; human person = free agent, demon/virus = enslaving agent. The drama is resolved when the bad guy is finally dealt with, with the implication that the exorcised victim will now returned to her fundamental, free self. When it comes to looking at the New Testament, then, the stories of demon possession seem little more than quaint interpretations of illness. Jesus appears now as a gifted therapist, able to put a finger on the problem and relieve these sufferers of their illness; off they then go, happy ever after.

But we do little justice to the stories, and rob ourselves of a great deal, if we simply reduce New Testament demonology to primitive medicine. The exorcisms in the New Testament are stories of the liberation of people who find themselves inextricably entangled within things greater and more powerful than themselves. And the emphasis must fall on *inextricably*, for while we typically draw clear distinctions between the demon and the demon-possessed, the stories themselves show how the spirit and the person become confused, to the extent that it is not really clear where the person actually is and where the demon is, other than that they are wrapped up in each other.

Listen again to the first part of today's reading

*<sup>1,23</sup> Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, <sup>24</sup> and he cried out, “What have you to do with us...”*

While it probably sounds straightforward, in fact it's not at all clear who is speaking here. If it is the man who cries out, “what have you to do with us”, why the “us” which seems to include the man himself with the demon? This confusion is even more dramatic a little later, in chapter 5 (vv6ff). When a possessed man sees Jesus, he shouts “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” For we are told that Jesus had said to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” That is, Jesus has addressed the spirit, but it is the man who speaks;

or is it? Has Jesus been “tormenting” the man, or the spirit? The account then goes on: Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” While it might seem that Jesus has addressed the man and asked his name, “the man” replies, “My name is Legion; for we are many”. Presumably here the demon speaks, though it is the man’s reply. Finally we hear, “He” earnestly begged Jesus not to send “them” out of the country. Who is the “he” here? If it is the man, why does he refer to “them” as a group distinct from himself? Does the man not want to be exorcised?

The important thing here is the *slippage* between the identity of the man and the identity of that which possesses him, such that the one is addressed, but the other answers, but the one answering seems to speak also for the one possessed, and so on. In these stories we encounter something much more subtle than what features in popular representations of the demonic. If all a demon can do is throw you into convulsions and twist your head 360 degrees on your shoulders then, by comparison with what the gospels describe, you’ve really nothing to worry about(!). The demons of the New Testament are far more dangerous than this, for they suppress their victims in such a way that the victim seems almost to embrace his oppressor. By contrast, the neat separation of the powers which possess and those possessed by them does not speak the truth about our condition. It imagines that I exist independently of the things which have formed me, or that I am clearly distinguishable from the things which bear down on me from without. This portrayal of the demonic imagines that, fundamentally, I am free but occasionally limited by some external and unfriendly force: just deal with that and I’m free again.

When we look to see what Jesus the liberator encounters in this broken world, it is rather a confusion of identities, such that it is not clear whether I am myself, or the things which have happened to me. Am I as free as I and others imagine, and so responsible for what I have done; or is my hand forced by things beyond my control, such that I don’t know how I could have done differently? Although we speak of “I” here, perhaps we should learn also to say “we” – not to be inclusive of each other but to be inclusive of all the powers which seem to direct our lives – those things the New Testament calls the demonic: “What is your name?” My name is Legion, for we are many.

For most of us, identity- and freedom-blurring “possession” is much less dramatic than that of the man in the synagogue in Capernaum. But it is there, and it is powerful. Consider our love of democracy – that “worst form of government except for all [the] other forms”. This is the only political system for us and yet the source of endless political and social frustration as senators are elected on a fraction of the vote and outgoing governments can knowingly expose a community to enormous compensation payments, without any accountability.

Or we might consider our situation as a congregation, enjoying both the benefit and suffering the burden of buildings like these. We know that the church is not its buildings, and yet also that a gathered community needs a place to gather. Our buildings have generally served us well and, yet, they also constitute an enormous burden, particularly at a time when most congregations’ fortunes are declining. What does freedom look like in the tension between the call to be the church, and the call to maintain structures (of all kinds – buildings, committees, reporting regimes) which are not of the essence of being the church? If we were to make a simple statement, what most has us as a congregation in its possession? Clues might be found in what we spend most of our time talking about when we get together, or what we spend most of our money on.

The “demonic” is symbolic of what is external to us and yet also within us in such a way that we are both distinguishable from it, and not. To understand what Mark has to say about powers is to be able to see more, and less, clearly than the simplistic demonologies of the movies and of contemporary politics and moral discourse. That is, we are learning to see how hard it is to see clearly here; we and our demons are not easily prised apart. While the political “right” pins everything on the free individual, and the “left” on the binding structures of society, the New Testament is less optimistic about our capacity to know which is which.

This is the realism of the gospel, although, perhaps it also seems to be the pessimism of gospel: what can save us from this body of death, this ever being enthralled by things which are not us, this never being fully ourselves? Yet this realism is a necessary preamble to the good news, and what causes the response of the people to Jesus in the synagogue: here is a teaching with authority, and not what we have been used to. The authority has nothing to do with whether Jesus has a deep voice or penetrating eyes as he speaks, but with his being “author” of those he addresses. A truth is expressed which is not *merely* true but which resonates, which moves. Here is a surgeon who understands what we are, who can separate flesh and bone, preserving what matters and excising what is wrong. In a modest and derivative way this is also the ministry of the people of God, but it *is* derivative from Jesus, and it is *modest*. For it is Jesus who expels and heals, and not us. The heart of New Testament demonology is seen in a place where no demons are actually manifest: in the crucifixion of Jesus. Here, for all the right reasons, the wrong thing takes place. When most clear-sighted, the people of God take a wholly wrong course. Here is the same kind of confusion the possessed man has with his demon. As it is unclear what is good and bad in us, where we end and the powers begin, so also a broken thing is made a sign of healing: “This is my body broken by you” becomes “This is my body broken for you”.

To be called to into the kingdom of this God is to be called to a discovery of the true nature of the kingdoms within which we already live, the powers to which we are already subject, our incapacity to extract a pure “me”. To be called into the kingdom of this God is to hear a promise that, despite all which seems to envelope us, we belong to God: You are mine and I am yours (to recall our [Advent reflections](#) last year). God discerns and claims us even in the midst of all the world’s confusion.

For such healing and liberation, and such a share in the life and work of God, all thanks and praise be to him, now and always. Amen.

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