

The Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Deuteronomy 18:15-20
<i>Response</i>	If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 7-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 7:32-35
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The people who sit in darkness have seen a great light; on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death, light has arisen.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 1:21-28

Welcome back everyone to our study of the Gospel of Mark. Today is the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year B. You might be a little surprised by the title of the video today; I've called it "Jesus the Exorcist." That might sound a little shocking because if you grew up in the United States in late 20th century like I did, when you hear the word "the exorcist," you think of the famous horror film in the late 1970s, or the novel that preceded it. But if you watch the introduction video to the Gospel of Mark that I made, you will notice that one of the key themes in Mark's gospel is Jesus's identity as an exorcist, as someone who not only goes around preaching and teaching, but also as one who casts out demons, who casts out the unclean spirits, as Mark will refer to him and his Gospel. So today what we're going to do, is we're going to look at the Gospel reading for today, which is one of the first stories in Mark's gospel about Jesus' exorcistic ministry. We'll look at the section and then will try to explain it and put it in context. So Mark 1:21-28 is the Gospel reading for today and this is what it says:

And they went into Caper'na-um; and immediately on the sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, "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." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves,

saying, "What is this? A new teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.¹

Okay, so end of story. Pretty striking opening passage from Jesus' public ministry here in John (Dr. Pitre meant to say "Mark"). I mean up to this point, he's begun preaching in a general way about the coming of the kingdom of God and he's begun calling his disciples, Peter and Andrew and James and John, but this is his first public appearance where he goes into the synagogue, preaches, teaches, and performs this wondrous act of casting out this unclean spirit. What's going on here? Well a couple of points. Number one, notice the context of Jesus' action here. The day, Mark tells us, is the Sabbath, so it's important to remember here that for a Jew in the 1st century the Sabbath is not Sunday. Christians tend to think of it as Sunday, but it's Saturday. It was the day of the last day of the week, the day that God hallowed and blessed in Genesis 1, and that Sabbath service would begin on Friday evening at sunset; that's when the Sabbath began. So Jesus here on this Saturday, on this holy day, has gone into the synagogue, just like all other Jews did, all pious Jews would do this, in order to pray, to read the Scriptures, and then to preach and teach; that's what they would do.

The synagogues were local assemblies, local gatherings, local buildings, where the Jews from the town would come together in order to worship God, but it's really important to remember here, that when we're talking about an ancient Jewish synagogue, it was different than the Temple, okay. We've mentioned the Temple before in our studies of the New Testament. The Temple was in one city, Jerusalem. And it was run by priests, and it had various annual festivals that people travel down to. But when it came to weekly festivals, for most Jews living outside of Jerusalem, the synagogue was their place of worship; the synagogue was where they went. But because it wasn't a temple complex, there were no sacrifices offered in the synagogue, it wasn't the priests who ran the synagogue, it was the laity, it was the laypeople, usually some appointed person like a pharisee or a scribe, someone who had learning would read the Scriptures and then they would teach the people. So that's why you can see here that Jesus goes into the synagogue, and even though he's not a Jewish priest, he's not a Levite, he's not a member of the tribe of Aaron, he is able to teach the people because the synagogue was the local lay-led assembly.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

So in that context, Jesus goes into his local synagogue in Capernaum and he begins to teach. And it says they are astonished at his teaching because it's different than the ordinary, weekly teaching of the Scribes and the Pharisees. Well what's the difference? Well it says here that Jesus taught as one who had "authority." Now that word authority is really important. The Greek behind it is *exousia*, and it means authority but it also means something more than that. It means power, right, that he has a certain dynamism; he has an authority that's different than what you would ordinarily have gotten from the Scribes and Pharisees. Now most of us when we read that, we might assume, well that means that Jesus was a better preacher, or that he preached with conviction, or that he was just more dynamic or captivating than the ordinary run-of-the-mill synagogue preachers, and that might be part of what's going on there. But I would actually suggest to you that in context, the immediate meaning of Jesus' *exousia*, of his authority, is that whenever he taught, he also performed signs that show that he had supernatural power, that he had supernatural authority, in particular that he had power over the demons; and that becomes clear in the story that immediately follows there. You'll notice it says, and immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. Before I move on, I want you to just notice something. You might point out there in the reading, twice Mark says immediately on the Sabbath he went to synagogue, and immediately there was in their synagogue a man. Both those occurrences of "immediately" are indicative of Mark's particular style. Over and over again Mark uses the word immediately, *utheós* in Greek, he uses it dozens of times in his gospel. And it gives the gospel the sense of Jesus' activism, like he's moving from one thing to another, to another; he does this and immediately he does that, and then immediately he goes here and then immediately he goes there. So pay attention to that as you're reading through the gospel. That's a characteristic feature of Mark's style, because Mark's interested in the dynamic activity of Jesus, especially his exorcisms.

Anyway, coming back to the story here. So it says that in their synagogue was a man with an unclean spirit. Now what does that mean? Well again the Greek is helpful here. The word for spirit is *pneuma*, it's the same word that we use for the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. And so whenever you find the expression "an unclean spirit," it means a spiritual being who is not good or holy, like the Holy Spirit, but wicked, unclean; that's what unclean means. So this was just a common 1st century Jewish way of referring to what we would call a demon, right, a fallen angel, a spiritual being that has fallen away from the goodness of God and into an activity of wickedness and sin and death and corruption in an allegiance with the head of the unclean spirits, which would be Satan. So this is a demon, in other

words. So Jesus here is encountering in the synagogue this demoniac, a man who's possessed by a demon, and you can see here that this isn't an ordinary man because the demon speaks through the man and says to him "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" Now what does that mean? Okay well it's kind of a cryptic saying. On the one hand, it seems obvious that the demon here recognizes not just that Jesus has power over him but that part of Jesus' mission is to destroy the power of Satan, is to destroy the power of the demonic, is to destroy the power of the fallen angels over sinful humanity. But there's a little more going on here because the image of Jesus destroying the demons may contain a cryptic allusion to the book of Genesis.

If you go back to the book of Genesis 3:15, this isn't the reading for today, but I'll just call it to your attention. There's a famous prophecy after the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15 where God declares that he's going to put enmity between the woman and the serpent, between her seed and the serpent seed, and that the seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent and the seed of the serpent will strike at the woman's seeds heel. Okay, it's kind of complicated, but in a nutshell, ancient Jews interpreted that passage as a prophecy about the coming of the Messiah, about the time of the Messiah, and that when the Messiah would come one of the things he would do would be to overthrow the power of the devil; that he would have power over the demonic forces of the world. And that would be one of the ways you would know he was the Messiah, because he would come and undo the effects of the fall, in which Adam and Eve put their descendants under the power of the serpent, which ancient Jews interpreted to be the devil. So when the unclean spirit says to Jesus "have you come to destroy us", he is alluding there to the expectation that the Messiah would conquer Satan and conquer the offspring of Satan, i.e. the other fallen angels. So this is a fascinating text here. Notice the other part of the demon's words here, he says, "I know who you are, the holy one of God." Now this is another aspect of Mark's gospel, it's really interesting. When Jesus engages in his exorcistic ministry, when he goes around and casts out the demons, frequently the demons will recognize him for who he is. Like, in other words, whereas the human beings don't get it, oh who's this preacher or who's this miracle worker, the demons know who he is and this is part of Mark's particular theme, known as the messianic secret. In other words, there are certain individuals in the gospel who will perceive the secret of Jesus' identity and Jesus, once those people say who he is, will silence them in order to keep his identity from being revealed until the right time; which you'll see when you get to the end of the gospel, he will reveal it publicly in his trial before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin. But in this case, this is right at the beginning of his ministry, so he wants to keep

his identity quiet, right, and so he silences the demon, rebukes him, and then casts him out in, in what is effectively his first exorcism in the Gospel of Mark.

Now notice one last aspect here, what the unclean spirit says. Notice he doesn't say, "I know who you are, the son of God" nor does he say "I know who you are, the Messiah, the anointed one" or "I know you are, the king of Israel", those aren't the titles the demon uses. The demon says, "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." Now what does that mean? Well you could just say, oh it means that Jesus was a holy man, and that the demon is recognizing that, but I would actually suggest that there's something more specific here. Because if you go back to the Old Testament, Psalm 106:16, you will discover that the expression "holy one", when it's with a definite article like "the holy one", is a title for the high priest. So in Psalm 106:16 we read these words:

When men in the camp were jealous of Moses and Aaron,
the holy one of the LORD, the earth opened and swallowed up Dathan

So Aaron in the Old Testament is called the holy one of the Lord. This was the title for the high priest because the high priest would wear a signet on his forehead that actually said *Kadosh l'Adonai*, in Hebrew, holy to the Lord, so I mean, he was literally the holy one, he had holy written on his forehead to identify him. So when you put it in that context, what is the demon saying here to Jesus? At the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark, the demon is recognizing that Jesus isn't just the Messiah or the King, Jesus is the true high priest, he's a Priestly Messiah, so he has spiritual power and authority over the demonic, and Jesus shuts him up the second he says that and then he casts him out.

Now, imagine if this happened at your church on a Sunday morning, right? I mean, because most of the people gathered in the synagogue for that Sabbath day were just going to an ordinary synagogue gathering, they weren't expecting an exorcism to be carried out in the middle of the service. And so once Jesus does that it says that everyone was amazed, and then they asked one another what is this, a new teaching with authority, he cast out the demons. So notice it's the same expression, in some translations a little different there, some will say "a new teaching!" others will say "a new teaching with authority!" However, if you break the sentence up, the point is that Jesus' authority that they're talking about, is his power over the demonic. It's the fact that he not only teaches the word of God, he also has power over the enemies of God, which are the unclean spirits, and this shocks them and this startles them because they recognize that these spirits obey Jesus and they do

his bidding; hence Jesus the exorcist, hence the title of this week's video. That is what Jesus is being revealed to be in this opening chapter of the Gospel of Mark.

Alright, so that's the New Testament reading for the week. What about the Old Testament passage for this time? It's a little harder to see the connection in this case. If you go back, the first reading for this Sunday is from the book of Deuteronomy. This is what it says; see if you can figure out what the connection might be. Moses said to the people of Israel:

"The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren -- him you shall heed — just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, or see this great fire any more, lest I die.' And the LORD said to me, 'They have rightly said all that they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not give heed to my words which he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.'

Alright, so pause there. What in the world does this have to do with Jesus in the New Testament, Jesus' exorcistic ministry? I think there are couple things here. First, this is a very famous prophecy of what the Jews would come to call "the new Moses." In other words, for ancient Jewish tradition this was regarded as one of the first prophecies of the Messiah. That one day, once the people of Israel were in the land of Israel, once they had fallen into sin as Moses said they would, God would raise up for them a prophet who would be like a new Moses and, just as Moses had spoken the word of God to the people of Israel, so too the new Moses would speak the words of God to the people, and in doing so...actually let me back up for a second...That's what it means when it says "I will put my words in his mouth and he shall speak to them all I command him". In other words, he's not going to be like some prophets, who are false prophets, because there are going to be people in the history of Israel who will rise up and they will purport to speak the words of God, but in fact it will be false prophets, they'll be charlatans that will come along. But what Moses is saying here is one day there's going to be someone just like me, who will speak to you the true words of God, right, and who will lead you back to the truth. So in that context here, the connection with Jesus is of course that Jesus' public ministry began with him doing what in the synagogue? t

Teaching and preaching. So when Jesus begins his ministry, he teaches the word of God to the people of God, and in order to show that he isn't a false prophet, he also demonstrates his power over the demons. In other words, he couples his teaching with supernatural signs and wonders just like Moses did. In other words, think about it for a second, you go on the Internet and find all kinds of people who are telling you that they are teaching the Word of God, right, that they have a message from God that they want to give to you that you can believe, but it's one thing to just talk the talk, it's another thing to confirm your teaching with supernatural signs and miracles and wonders, right. So the miracles of Jesus will always seem to be kind of a motive of credibility for believing that he was a true prophet just like Moses and not a false prophet, right. Moses didn't just say hey everyone I want to lead you out of Egypt, he also performed 10 plagues; right, to show Pharaoh that he had divine power, that he was commissioned by God to lead the people out of Egypt. And the same thing was true when he was in the desert and people were starting to doubt him. What did he do? He performs signs and wonders. He called down bread from heaven or he struck the rock at Mer'ibah and brought forth water for the people to feed them in the desert. So the miracles of Moses were motives of credibility for believing in him.

You can actually see that that seems to be the link when you look at the Responsorial Psalm, because the Responsorial Psalm for this Sunday is a very famous one, it's Psalm 95 with the refrain:

If Today You Hear His Voice, Harden Not Your Hearts

And in verse 7-8, we have those key lines:

O that today you would hearken to his voice!
Harden not your hearts, as at Mer'ibah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
when your fathers tested me,
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

I've talked about this Psalm in other videos because it's frequently used in the mass, but just to reiterate here, when it says "harden not your hearts as at Mer'ibah and Massah", those are the two names of the places where the Israelites grumbled against God and Moses struck the rock in order to give them water. So Massah in Hebrew means "testing", okay, because in the book of Exodus 17, the people put God to the test. He's just finished delivering them from Pharaoh, leading them through the waters of the Red Sea in Exodus 15, now they get to Exodus 17 and

they're thirsty and they actually say is God among us are not. In other words, where is this so-called God, what has he done for us lately? So they put him to the test by doubting Moses and by doubting that God is actually with Moses, so Moses strikes the rock and he performs a miracle and gives the water from the rock to show them God is with them. Mer'ibah in Hebrew means "contention", right. Why? Well because there was contention. There was another fight later on in the wilderness journey; this is in Numbers 20, where the people do the same thing again. They cry out against God, they cry out against Moses, and so Moses brings forth water from the rock for a second time in order to lead them to faith; he performs this sign. So that's the link between the miracles of Moses and the miracles of Jesus, the miracles of the first Moses and then the exorcisms of the prophet like Moses. So Jesus here is going to perform a sign and wonder in order to show them he's not just one more teacher, right, this is a new teaching with authority.

With that in mind, I'd just like to close with a quote from the Catechism of the Catholic Church, because I suspect that if you're like me and you grew up in the modern times, which I guess you all did, one of the aspects of modern Christianity is that we tend to be, especially in the West, more skeptical about the existence of Angels and Demons and that kind of thing. And so when we encounter stories in the Gospels, like today's account of the man with an unclean spirit, we can be a little questioning, in other words like, did this really happen? Do demons really exist? Was this really an important part of Jesus' ministry?

So I'd just like to close by pointing out that according to the official teaching of the Church, in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the exorcisms of Jesus as they are recounted in the Gospels are in fact real and they give us an important insight into the nature of Jesus' ministry. So in paragraph 550, the Catechism actually explains the meaning of Jesus' exorcistic ministry. So I'd like to close by just looking at what the Church teaches about this issue. It says in paragraph 550:

The coming of God's kingdom means the defeat of Satan's: "If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." [Matt 12:26]

That's a quote from Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. The catechism continues:

Jesus' exorcisms free some individuals from the domination of demons. They anticipate Jesus' great victory over "the ruler of this world." [John 12:31]

That's what Jesus calls the devil in John 12:31.

The kingdom of God will be definitively established through Christ's cross:
"God reigned from the wood."

So notice there that the Catechism says three key things. First, that when Jesus preaches the coming of the kingdom of God, that's not just a pretty metaphor for going to heaven after you die. What he's talking about is the in-breaking of God's dominion, God's authority, God's power, and God's kingdom, into a world which is dominated not by God, and governed not by God, but by the power of Satan, by the power of evil, by the power of demonic forces, that would separate human beings from God. So when Jesus talks about the kingdom of God, there's a spiritual battle, there's two kingdoms at war: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. And Jesus' ministry means that the kingdom of Satan is coming to an end, that's why the demon says to him, "have you come to destroy us?" The second thing the Catechism says there is that Jesus' exorcisms are a sign of the kingdom, right. If it is by the spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. So his exorcisms aren't just him putting on a show, they're meant to point to the reality of the coming of that kingdom. And then third and finally, the Catechism says that Jesus' exorcisms of particular individuals who were under the power of demonic forces point to his ultimate victory over the prince of this world, or the ruler of this world, which is on the cross, because effectively what Jesus is going to do on the cross is break the power of Satan by taking death upon himself and then freeing humanity from death through his resurrection.

So this is a really powerful episode of Jesus at the beginning of Mark's gospel, the story of the man with the unclean spirit and I think that it really challenges us to have a broader view of who Jesus of Nazareth is. He's not just a good teacher. He's not just a good moral example to us. He's someone who teaches with power. He's someone who teaches with authority, and who has the authority to set us free from the evil influences that often dominate our lives, and that would lead us away from God, in the power of the demonic forces of the world. Which if you look around these days, you can see at work all around us in many different ways. And so there's good news here to be had in the account of Jesus the Exorcist.