**Astonished and amazed at Jesus’ authority** 19/2/23 dkm

Read: Mark 1:14-28, Acts 19:19:1-19

Text: Mark 1: 21-28

Psalms: 8, 2:6-12, 1, 72old

The boy’s body suddenly went into convulsions as he lay on his bed. The other students in the room were alarmed. They did not know what was happening to their friend. Most were from tribal backgrounds. Some were familiar with the work of witch doctors and shamans. By the time I was called, one student had begun burning garlic, with the idea of warding of the evil spirits. Was this boy demon-possessed? As I arrived, the local evangelist also arrived. He listened to see if the boy said anything to indicate an evil spirit possessed him. The evangelist pointed out that in the Bible a demon-possessed person spoke differently to the person not possessed. Often there were many demons that spoke in the plural. As it turned out, this was not the case with this student. The boy was suffering from epilepsy, a medical condition. A doctor was called to give him medication.

Jesus came down from Nazareth to the lake of Galilee. As he walked by the lake he called four fishermen to follow him, and they did. They went into the town of Capernaum, and being the Sabbath day they went to the local synagogue; ‘Immediately on the Sabbath’ writes Mark (1:21). We will look at what happened in the synagogue that day as recorded by Mark; Luke gives a very similar account. We have three subheadings: ‘Astonished’, ‘Accosted’ and, ‘Amazed’.

**1. Astonished**

Jewish worship involved, among other things, reading a passage of Scripture and having someone explain the passage. Any adult male could be asked to give the message; rabbis were preferred if available. Jesus had been preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God in Galilee so may have been known to the ruler of the synagogue. Jesus, we presume, was invited to preach that day after a passage of Scripture was read- what passage we are not told- Mark simply writes, ‘He taught’ (1:21,22).

But Mark says more than this; he says that Jesus, ‘Taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes’. So different was the teaching of Jesus that the people were astonished. They were used to the scribes struggling to explain Scripture; they avoided passages like Isaiah 53. These scribes, like many scholars today, looked to what other men had said about the passage rather than at the word of God itself. Once I was criticised for referring to some scholars in a sermon, and rightly so- although it does help occasionally, and I may do so today!

Being the Son of God, Jesus would find no help in the writings of men. As the author of Scripture he did not even need the Bible, but he knew it to be the inspired and infallible word of God. Jesus knew that the words of God do not change. The people in the synagogue at Capernaum noted, indeed were astonished, that Jesus taught as one having authority. That authority came from his being the Son of God, and it came from the written word of God. Remember how Jesus answered Satan with words of Scripture, and Satan could not refute him. Satan can confuse the words of men, and still does so, but he cannot confuse the words of the preacher who sticks to the words of the Bible and preaches with the authority of these words. I once wrote on a flyer, ‘Come to church and hear God speaking’, which may be going a bit far, but it was certainly what the people in the synagogue at Capernaum heard that day.

**2. Accosted**

The worshippers in the synagogue at Capernaum listened with great interest to what Jesus was teaching that day; they had never heard a sermon like it. I imagine you could have heard a pin drop, as they say. But the ‘silence’ was suddenly broken when a man stood up and shouted at Jesus at the top of his voice, ‘Let us alone! What have we to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth’ (1:24, Luke 4:34). The man was disturbed, and he was disturbing the meeting. What was disturbing the man? He had ‘an unclean spirit’ or ‘spirit of an unclean demon’ (1:23, Luke 4:33). In other words, he was demon-possessed. It may be that the man was physically unkempt and dirty, but the word ‘unclean’ describes the demon not the man.

Demons are created beings. They belong to the realm of angels. They are angels that rebelled against God their creator and are forever cursed. The prince of demons had recently tempted Jesus in the desert, trying to get Jesus to worship him. He knew Jesus was the Son of God. He knew why Jesus was sent into this world- although not all the details of the cross and resurrection. For the devil it was a battle of kingdoms. Satan was the ruler of this world, and had been since the Fall. Jesus was a threat to his kingdom, to his rule and to his very being. Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). He came to destroy him who has the power of death, that is the devil (Heb 2:14).

When his temptations failed, the devil set out to oppose Jesus and his work in other ways. He tried to disrupt his ministry through demon-possessed people. He cared nothing for the people that the demons possessed. In the Bible, demon possession is mostly found during the ministry of Jesus. The apostles encountered this phenomenon only twice (Acts 16:16f, 19:13f). In Acts 19 the seven sons of Sceva tried to exorcise an evil spirit. ‘We exorcise you by the Jesus who Paul preaches’ they said to the demon (Acts 19:13). The possessed man leapt on them and gave them a thrashing. They did not know Jesus, and they did not know the power of the devil. They were playing with fire as it were. Great harm can be done by such ignorance, ignorance that we see all too often in churches today. Exorcising demons was not the focus of ministry in the early church, yet it has become the focus in some churches today.

Psychologists and others will deny the possibility of demon possession. The modern world sees such phenomena as belonging to the cinema rather than real life. Even some Christians deny the reality of Satan, and hence of demon possession. But the Bible clearly teaches the reality of Satan and of demon possession. It is not merely a mental state with an organic explanation. It is a spiritual phenomenon in which evil spirits make their home in a person and impact that person’s mind and body. There are people who deliberately seek demon possession. Witch doctors and shamans that hold sway over people in some religions, actually seek the power of evil and then exercise that power. We have devil worshippers in our own western society. Such phenomena are a reality. Here in the Bible we read of a man with the spirit of an unclean demon, but there is no indication that this man sought this possession. He was a victim.

One commentator points out, ‘Jesus nowhere speaks of forgiveness of sins or of purification sacrifices that have to be brought after his curing of such cases (as he did in some cases of physical illness)’. Moreover, demon possession is to be distinguished from sickness and disease, even mental sickness. We cannot say that there is an evil spirit behind every sickness and disease. We must not go around trying to exorcise demons from medically sick people. We are told to be discerning and to test the spirits (1John 4:1).

The unclean spirit in the man in the synagogue recognized Jesus, not only as coming from Nazareth but as the Holy One of God. This is not a common title, but it is appropriate. Jesus is the Son of the Holy God. He is the one set apart by God to establish his kingdom. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. ‘Holy’ also means ‘pure’ or ‘clean’, in contrast to the ‘unclean’ demon. The demons in this man at Capernaum recognised Jesus as the Holy One of God, and they were filled with fear and trembling.

It is ironic that the demons recognised Jesus as the Messiah of God and were afraid of him, while the Jews failed to recognise him. It is tragic that today millions of people fail to recognise Jesus as the Son of God who was sent into this world to establish the kingdom of God. People who deny the existence of God or of the devil are, through their very ignorance, playing into the hands of Satan. They stand condemned by God, for as James reminds us, ‘even the demons believe there is one God’ (James 2:19).

The unclean spirit, speaking with the vocal organs of the man he had possessed, was fearful that Jesus had come to destroy him, or rather ‘us’ (1:24); the demons often came in a party or a pack (Mark 5:9 points to two thousand in one man). This is exactly what Jesus came to do, to destroy the devil who had the power of death (Heb 2:14). Just why this demon announces to everyone that he knew who Jesus was, namely ‘the Holy One of God’, is not certain. It may be that by naming his name the demon thought he would gain power over Jesus. If so, he was mistaken. Besides, Jesus had already been heralded as King by John the Baptist, and he had no need or desire to have Satan making him known to the world.

**3. Amazed**

The unclean spirit had possessed the man and he could do nothing about it. He was helpless under this demon possession. Mere humans are powerless when it comes to defending themselves against evil spirits. But Jesus demonstrated power over these demons. He rebuked them and they were gone. The people watching were amazed (1:27). Jesus rebuked the demon saying, ‘Be quiet, and come out of him!’ (1:25); the literal meaning is, 'be muzzled' or 'stop your mouth'. ‘The demon spoke the truth about Jesus, but his knowledge was not accompanied by faith, hope or charity’ writes J.C. Ryle. Jesus did not need the testimony of demons. He did not listen to Satan’s temptations and he did not listen to these demons. He acted immediately and decisively to silence them. Let us not get caught up in any dialogue with the devil.

Jesus did not enter into any ritual or incantations to exorcise these demons. Such things we see even in the church sometimes. People think they have some formula that works. The only thing that works is the power of Jesus. Jesus spoke and the demon was silenced. The apostle Paul, in the case with the demon-possessed slave girl, commanded the demon in the name of Jesus. But remember the sons of Sceva with their, ‘Jesus whom Paul preaches’ in Acts 19:13.

Jesus was not taken by surprise when this man interrupted his teaching in the synagogue. He recognised the voice of demons and acted to silence them. He did not think that this was a voice ‘from the other side’ with some new revelation. Demons are real and they are powerful, but they are unclean. Those who are curious and ignorantly listen to demons are playing with fire. They will get burnt. They will be destroyed along with the devil and his angels. We must flee every form of evil and have nothing to do with unclean spirits.

As the demon came out at the command of Jesus, he tried to hurt and even destroy this man in the synagogue. ‘The unclean spirit convulsed him’ (1:26). In Luke 9:42 we read of a boy who was convulsed and thrown about by an evil spirit, before Jesus rebuked the spirit. Jesus did not allow the evil spirit to hurt this man in the synagogue (Luke 4:35). He was delivered from the demons and restored to normality by Jesus. We would hope he was thankful to Jesus and followed him after this.

We are not told what became of this man but we are told that everyone in the synagogue that day was amazed (1:27). They spoke to one another asking, ‘What is this?’ (1:27); this man Jesus was different. Not only did he speak from the Scripture with authority, but also demonstrated authority and power over demons right in front of their eyes. The demons obeyed his orders, but would the people obey him? News spread throughout Galilee like wildfire making it hard for Jesus to move about freely.

You believe in God. Good. So does the devil. You know there is a devil and demons. Good. You know they are more powerful that you. Good. You know that Jesus is the only name by which these demons can be rebuked. Good. Be neither ignorant nor paranoid about demons. Trust in Jesus and listen to him and him alone, for in him we have the victory.