

The Good News as told by Mark

New World Order

Subtitle

Mark 1:21-28

Many Christians today reading the stories of Jesus healing people of disease or exorcising demons have a tendency to see these actions as signs of Jesus' compassion for the afflicted or as proofs that Jesus is God's Son. Occasionally the Gospels support these interpretations (for example, Mark 1:41; John 2:11). On the whole, however, the Gospel writers treat Jesus' miracles as acts that raise questions about who he is and whose power he employs.

The Gospel reading today, the first miracle recorded by Mark, provides an excellent illustration of this understanding of miracles. The man who is afflicted with the unclean spirit is not the focus of the story. Indeed, he comes on stage only as the carrier of the unclean spirit. Nothing is said about the man himself, his background, his faith or lack thereof. Jesus' conversation is with the spirit, and Jesus' action is on the spirit. After the exorcism, the man is not even mentioned.

Not only does the man who is afflicted and then healed receive little attention, but the exorcism itself is treated with haste. Jesus is teaching, he casts out the unclean spirit that presents itself, and the final report returns to the issue of Jesus' authoritative teaching. For Mark, then, what makes this event important stems from the teaching of Jesus and the issue of authority rather than from the exorcism alone.

When the story opens, Jesus enters the synagogue in Capernaum, where his teaching amazes people because he teaches "as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (1:22). The contrast between Jesus and the scribes is noteworthy, since the scribes were regarded as important and knowledgeable teachers in the Jewish community. When Mark says that Jesus' teaching has 'authority' he may mean something other than its credibility or reliability. Exactly what 'authority' means here remains to be seen.

The unclean spirit bursts into the scene and confronts Jesus with a challenge ("Have you come to destroy us?") and with a title ("the Holy One of God"). As elsewhere in Mark, unclean spirits and others who are outside organized religion recognize who Jesus is, while those who might be expected to know Jesus do not. Despite this display of knowledge on the spirit's part, it obeys Jesus' rebuke. (See Acts 19:11-20 where unclean spirits did not acquiesce to the demands of every would-be exorcist!)

Most miracle stories, including exorcisms, conclude with a demonstration of the effectiveness of the cure and the response of those who have observed it. Here the demonstration drops out altogether and the response that comes from bystanders is a curious one: "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." Jesus' power over the unclean spirits reinforces the earlier judgment that his teaching is authoritative.

Again, based on our understanding of healing as an act of compassion, we might anticipate that Jesus' exorcism would prompt bystanders to rejoicing and celebration. Jesus brings gifts that we imagine ourselves receiving with outstretched arms, but nothing in this story indicates that he was so received.

Instead, the story concludes with, “News about him spread quickly.” It suggests only that word went out regarding this event, but not how it was received.

The story culminates, then, in a question: “What (or, who) is this?” Who is this man? What is the source of his power? What do these events mean? The answer is not obvious, and this question will continue to be explored through most of Mark. What makes this question the more intriguing is that so many of today's Christians believe that miraculous events, if ever witnessed first-hand, would produce unerring and unwavering faith. The Gospel writers know otherwise. They know that miracles demonstrate power, but power can come from a variety of sources, both good, evil and everywhere in between. The Gospel writers also know that understanding who Jesus is and what his mission entails involves far more than simply witnessing a miracle.

The demon understands what is happening. It recognizes Jesus as the Holy One of God and knows he has come to break their power. Here Jesus deals with one demon. On the Cross the power of death and hell as a whole are defeated, and God's kingdom comes that much closer. Mark gives us a brief portrait of that victory as Jesus commences his ministry. Paul reflects on the complete victory in, among other places, his letter to the Colossians.

Colossians 2:13-15

The question becomes, now that you know this, how will you respond?

Amen.

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