

# Scripture Comments

Mark 1.21-28

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Faith Healing

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Since Christmas, Jesus has been revealed as the King of the Jews, Son of God, Lamb of God, Messiah, a preacher and as the one who calls disciples. Today Jesus is presented as a teacher and exorcist. We also hear a new title in today's story, Holy One of God. It is interesting to note that this title comes from the demon. I invite you to note that a demon that speaks the truth is still a demon.

In the first chapter, Mark provides six episodes to describe the nature of Jesus' ministry. We are reading the second in this series of independent stories. Even though they are independent, they are arranged as though they are a "day in the life" of Jesus. Another literary observation is that this is the first of several compound stories. The story begins with Jesus teaching in the synagogue, which is interrupted by an exorcism. The comments from the crowd draw our attention to the teaching rather than the exorcism. It is the authority of his teaching that gets the attention of the crowd. The interruption at first appears to be unrelated, but upon analysis, we realize that the interruption is related. Mark uses this device in telling the story of raising Jairus' daughter, which is interrupted by the woman with the hemorrhage (5.21-34). Another time Jesus curses the fig tree, cleanses the temple and returns to discover a withered fig tree (11.12-26). In the story for today, the interruption (exorcism) illustrates the power of Jesus' teaching.

Mark describes Jesus as a teacher more frequently than do Matthew or Luke. What is more significant is that "teacher" is used in connection with miracles: the teacher stills the storm (4.38), the teacher raises the dead (5.35), the teacher feeds the hungry (6.34), the teacher cures the epileptic (9.17), and the teacher curses the fig tree (11.21). By contrast, with Matthew, who says that Jesus teaches with authority and then provides a large block of teaching material (chapter 5-7), Mark says that Jesus teaches with authority but does not mention what Jesus said. Mark does record parables, especially in chapter four, but the primary emphasis is on the power of Jesus' teaching.

Mark provides an image of Jesus as the strong Son of God who enters this world in which the forces of evil (Satan and demons) are crippling, alienating, distorting and destroying life. According to Mark, the powers that seek to sabotage God's creating and caring work not only cause disease but also disturb the natural elements (4.37-39) and insinuate themselves into the circle of Jesus' closest friends (8.33). With Jesus comes the word of authority to heal, to help, to give life, and to restore. In Mark, a battle is joined between good and evil, truth and lie, life and death, God and Satan. Sometimes the battle is waged in the synagogue. Even the structures of religion can house the forces of evil that oppose the Gospel.

The first miracle recorded in Mark is this exorcism. The man possessed by the demon is no more than a literary prop. We know nothing about the man, his background, his faith or lack of faith. Jesus' conversation is with the demon and Jesus' action is on the demon. After the exorcism, the man is not mentioned. To be fair, the exorcism is treated with haste. The

important thing in the story is the teaching. Mark has the crowd in the synagogue describe Jesus' teaching as with authority. We are left knowing that this means something more than credibility and reliability, but exactly what "authority" means remains to be seen.

The real action of the story begins when the demon possessed man bursts into the synagogue and confronts Jesus. The most commonly rendered translation is with the question, "Have you come to destroy us?" An alternative rendering, which is just as possible, could be, "You have come to destroy us." We will see this model of recognition of who Jesus is in other stories. Those outside the religious power structure recognize who Jesus is. Those whom we expect to know Jesus do not.

This story ends a bit differently from other exorcisms. We expect the story to end with a demonstration of the effectiveness of the cure. There is no demonstration at all. The only response to the miracle comes from the crowd of bystanders. Their response is not what we expect either. They ask, "What is this? A new teaching – with authority." As I said earlier, the crowd comments concerning the authority of Jesus' teaching, as contrasted with that of the Scribes. At the end of the story, we realize that the exorcism reinforces the earlier judgment that Jesus is teaching with authority.

We think of healing, especially miraculous healing, as an act of God's compassion. We read about Jesus healing the sick and we imagine ourselves with outstretched arms, waiting to receive the gift from Jesus. There is no mention of compassion or faith at the conclusion of this story. The last line says, "At once his fame began to spread." The word we translate as "fame" can also mean "report." The conclusion of this story saying is that word went out regarding what happened in the synagogue, but we do not know how it was received.

When the crowd asks, "What is this?" I believe we can just as accurately read, "Who is this?" The crowd does not explicitly ask "who," but it is implicit. Who is this man? What is the source of his power? What does this mean? As readers of this story, we think we know the answers. The demon seems to know who Jesus is. The disciples have responded to the authority of Jesus' call. But the crowd does not know who this is or what is happening. The answer to those questions is no more obvious today than it was when this story was written. Mark will spend much of the remainder of this Gospel asking these same questions.

I used to say that if I could have witnessed just one of Jesus' miracles, I would have unwavering faith; faith that could move a mountain. Mark knows better. The miracles only prove that Jesus has power. All of the Gospel writers know that understanding who Jesus is and what his mission demands involves more than simply witnessing a miracle. Even for us, perhaps especially for us, the teaching and miracles of Jesus raise as many questions as they answer.

#### References:

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