

A Clash of Worlds

Please note that this article is also available as an audio file if you wish to hear it read instead of reading it yourself.

This week's bible reading is from Mark chapter 1 verses 21 - 28.

Introduction

I suspect that we've all sat through a sermon or two that has moved us to tears – of the wrong kind, when we've desperately wished that the preacher would just finish and sit down. Indeed, in our modern culture, we are bombarded by words from all sides today these days - from people vying for attention on TV; on the radio; through email and social media. But with so much being said all around us, we often just let words wash right over us. As a result we can also underestimate just how powerful words can be.

In NT times, the Jews understood words quite differently from the way we do in the West today. They saw words as being dynamic, powerful, able to have great effect, either for good or bad. Indeed, the Bible tells that God's Word is:

"...living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword... it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." (Heb 4:12)

The bible also tells us that Jesus is God's Word made flesh. So this traditional Hebrew idea of God's Word as living and active, actually became real in the most literal sense possible: God's Word came alive as a living, breathing person – Jesus of Nazareth.

The Power of God's Word

In today's bible reading, we hear how Jesus' teaching, His words, had authority and power that gave new hope and life to those who heard Him. Regarding Jesus, St. Mark tells us that:

"The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law."

There was something extraordinary; something compelling about Jesus' words. They were different from the words the people were used to hearing from the Scribes, Pharisees and Teachers-of-the-law, as they would just reiterate and reinforce Jewish traditions and customs - but Jesus came speaking words of life and hope, unlike anything the people had heard before. He spoke God's word

directly into their situation. And we see this power at work in a very remarkable and graphic way in our Gospel reading this morning. We're told that:

"...a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are - the Holy One of God!"

"Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!"

The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek."

There was a power in Jesus' words which could not be resisted. The dark spiritual forces that had gripped this man, were immediately subdued and banished. Jesus' words also brought healing, restoration and forgiveness to the man, and he was given a new life and new hope for the future. But how did Jesus do that? How did He heal and restore and forgive this man? Well, He spoke just six words - nothing more.

However, before I go any further, I want address the question some of you may have about this incident, namely, was it real? Was this an actual exorcism – a real case of demon possession?

Evil Spirits

Now I fully admit, that talk of demon possession and evil spirits sits very uncomfortable with modern western culture, and I know it's dismissed with contempt by many as nothing more than superstitious nonsense. They argue that we no-longer live in the dark ages, this is the 21st century where evil spirits exist only in a Harry Potter movie. How can intelligent, rational people be expected to take the Christian faith seriously, if they're being asked to accept things like this story from Mark's Gospel, as literal, historical fact. Now I will say at the outset that full-blown demon possession – as we read about here in Mark, is very rare, and most of us will never encounter it – but that doesn't mean it isn't real.

But questions regarding the authenticity of this incident, are valid, and deserve a considered and intelligent answer. Unfortunately, there isn't time this morning to go into this subject in any real depth, as this is only a short address, but there are a few points I'd like to make, which I hope you'll find helpful.

Three Points

Firstly, here in the West, in the public arena, we have a very narrow definition of truth and it's important that we are aware of how our own culture understands truth. Before something can be regarded as public truth, it must be proven in some kind of empirical, scientific way. And only when it appears to be beyond dispute, can it be accepted as public truth.

Secondly, as a result of that first point, our western worldview has effectively written off the spiritual realm – not just evil spirits, but the whole lot - God, angels, heaven and hell, everything – it's all written off because it cannot be proven scientifically, and so it has to be eliminated from the arena of public truth and securely confined to the area of private belief. It's one of the main reasons why it's so very difficult to talk about anything spiritual in the public domain today.

So it's this scientific world view that dominates the media and the public arena – and there simply isn't room for a real objective God in this world view. God is reduced to “a belief some people have” - nothing more than that, and so can be safely be dismissed as a myth.

And, thirdly, when we do try to talk openly in public about spiritual things, people's alarm bells start ringing, and we are marked out as somewhat odd or even fanatical. Think of the street preacher with his placards and pamphlets and how people react, giving him a wide berth. Even people like archbishops are only given air time or column inches, if what they are speaking about, is clearly related to political and social – or something controversial. They absolutely won't get air time to talk purely about God or spiritual matters.

Back to the Gospel

Now you might be thinking, “well I'm intelligent, rational, normal, and I believe in God; I believe Angels are real, just as the Bible teaches”. Well, good, I hope that's what you are thinking. But the reason you think that way, is because when we embrace Jesus as our Lord, our worldview changes. What I mean by this is that the way we see the world, the way we understand reality, changes when we come to faith in Christ, and understand and who Jesus really is. At that point, we start to see the world through God's eyes and understand it through the teaching of the Bible.

As Christians we are introduced to a new understanding of truth, the truth that the spiritual world is real. Now the spiritual world is beyond the scope of modern science, which has its limits - and is only visible through the eyes of faith. But that doesn't mean it isn't real or just a fantasy. When we come to faith in Christ, we start to recognise, that the world is far more complex and mysterious than science alone can explain, because science has its limits. As St Paul puts it this way, he said (1 Cor 2:14).

“The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

A Clash of Worlds

I want to finish, by getting back to the man that Jesus healed and restored. Clearly there is much more going on here than meets the eye; more going on than science alone can either prove or explain. What we have here is an eye witness account of a power encounter. A clash between two

worlds; between light and darkness; between good and evil. A clash between God and Satan. To understand what we are reading about, we need to see this encounter through God's eyes, because that will give us a view of the world which is deeper, wider and richer than that which Western science can provide.

Now you could try and argue that Jesus was just dealing with a case of mental illness, schizophrenia or epilepsy, things they didn't understand in NT times. But then you'd have to explain how Jesus was able to heal such a serious illness with just six words, because that too, would be a miracle. No, the eyewitness details of this incident clearly indicate that something much more sinister is happening here. And this is made clear by the conversation which Mark records. Jesus isn't going to have an imaginary conversation with evil spirits that didn't exist.

A New Hope

The end result, however, that really matters - this man was restored, healed and had his life given back; he was then returned to his family, whole again. That's the real miracle here. Forgiveness, restoration and the giving of life and hope -that's why Jesus came; that's the business God is in, and He's here for you today - He wants to help you, He wants to heal and He wants to bless. And He's only a prayer away. Amen.