

Epiphany 4 Sermon 2021: Mark 1.21-28

May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region”.

We’ve only just begun the account of the life of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel. This is only the first chapter of the Gospel, and in only a few short paragraphs Jesus is already famous!

In the few verses since the beginning of the story, Jesus has been baptised, he’s called his first disciples, and then this!: His first teaching session in the synagogue; and his first miracle; and his fame has already begun to spread.

It’s probably hard for us, over 2,000 years after these events, and with all our knowledge of Jesus, to appreciate how remarkable Jesus truly was.

The Gospel writer is clear that what makes Jesus stand out, is the authority with which he taught (not like the usual teachers in the synagogues – the scribes). And according to all four Gospel writers, Jesus is seen as a very, truly, remarkable person – a teacher and a healer and, uniquely, the Son of God: God incarnate. God in the flesh. God made visible. God, here amongst us.

As we come to the end of the season of Epiphany, we transition from looking back at the wonder of Jesus’ birth and the beginning of his public ministry and begin to look forward to three short years of his work, and how that came to fruition on Good Friday and Easter, which we will recall in just 9 weeks’ time.

But for now, we’re still transfixed by the remarkable, and almost instantaneous, shockwaves that Jesus created by being himself; someone of great integrity; someone of great authority; someone of wisdom and compassion.

In first century Palestine, unlike in our own culture, there were no residential homes or hospitals where people who were struggling with their mental health went. Rather, they were looked after by the village – cared for by the whole community.

And so, when this man, with the so-called ‘unclean spirit’ started crying out, this was nothing unusual. However, what was completely unusual, was that anyone could help the disturbed person but that is exactly what Jesus did. The Son of God did it. He spoke with authority, and told the unclean spirit where to go. No wonder everyone was amazed and the fame of Jesus “spread throughout the surrounding region”.

In these days of continuing lockdown, of isolation, and loneliness, of worry, and anxiety, there is a growing concern for the wellbeing of our nation. There is increasing evidence to suggest that the majority of us, in one way or another, struggle particularly during the hours of darkness to remain at peace and hopeful. For many of us, the hours of the night are sometimes tinged with fear and even panic.

Our current challenging circumstances may be manageable in the hours of light, with all the distractions of work and activity, but come the silence of the night, without the distractions of the day, the monsters of our minds become larger, and the pain in our heart beats faster and louder.

Such “terrors of the night” are experienced by many of us and can be quite exhausting and debilitating, and quite out of character. Maybe you’ve never experienced such dark thoughts and feelings before, but you are now. Be assured you’re not alone.

We are living in unprecedented times and our minds are fertile places for anxieties to flourish.

The American author, Tish Harrison Warren, writing in her recently published book, “Prayer in the night”, reminds us that God made the night as well as the day, and in Revelation we’re told that at the end of all things, there will be no more night. “Night will be no more”.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is described as the light in the darkness. The light that darkness, and night, cannot overcome.

The sixteenth-century, Saint John of the Cross, wrote about “the dark night of the soul”, referring to a time of grief, doubt, and spiritual crisis, when God seems shadowy and distant.

The reason this resonates with us is because night is when our fears and anxieties tend to surface.

So, if this, in any way, is your experience, in these challenging times, I wonder what we can do about it?

The authority that Jesus had, that enabled him to speak powerfully and what made him so readily famous, is the same authority that the Spirit of God has given to us through our baptism. We too, in the name of Jesus, can speak with authority and unhelpful spirits depart.

When I wrote in the February update, I suggested that we might choose to begin each day declaring our faith and trust in the “Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” And that we might do the same at the end of the day and as we settle down for the night. I also offered a prayer. An encircling prayer. A prayer which visualises us surrounded, encircled by the never-ending circle of God’s love: around us, over us, beside us and below us. A prayer that takes the authority of Jesus, given to us by His Holy Spirit, to keep us safe within God’s encircling, all-encompassing, love and keeping outside anything which might harm us, including our own thoughts.

Encircling prayers can be created by each of us in our own situations at any time. They can be very simple but effective prayers which speak to our present circumstances and our own state of mind.

We can pray something like:
Keep peace within and fear without
Keep faith within and disbelief without
Keep hope within and despair without
Keep love within and hate without
Keep light within and darkness without

These are practical prayers to guard you, and to protect you, as you grapple with whatever it is that stops you from sleeping or wakes you early. They are prayers which you can repeat and memorise and use whenever you begin to sense your mood deteriorating.

Our God is, as the Psalmist says, "A very present help in times of trouble."
So let us call upon the name of the Lord, so that we will be saved from our enemies.

The Book of Common Prayer, in the Service of Compline, to be said just before going to sleep, includes a number of beautiful and effective prayers. I encourage you to look them up and to use them alongside creating your own encircling prayers, and I could conclude with any one of them, but I choose this one:

We will lay us down in peace and take our rest. For it is thou, Lord, only that makest us dwell in safety.

"Be present, O merciful God,
and protect us through the silent hours of this night,
so that we who are wearied
by the changes and chances of this fleeting world,
may you repose upon thy eternal changlessness;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen"