

The story of Jesus' early ministry which we are following in Mark's gospel continues in Galilee but moves to Capernaum, an important fishing village on the north west shores of the lake. You can visit the well excavated ruins of Capernaum today and catch the atmosphere of Jesus' time. The synagogue where today's story takes place is prominent, and although what you can see dates from the 4th century it is thought likely that this later structure was built over an earlier building, quite possibly the one where Jesus taught and healed.

Once again we see the concentrated style of Mark's gospel. This is his first account of Jesus teaching in public but we don't hear the content of what he taught. Mark is more concerned with the manner of his teaching and the extraordinary effect it had on his hearers. In the equivalent story of his first public teaching in Luke's gospel, Jesus unfurls the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and reads from it of God's promise of good news for the poor, liberation from captivity and oppression – and tells his hearers that the prophecy is fulfilled in him. Mark has already given us a summary of Jesus' message: 'The kingdom of God is near, repent and believe!' – and now he focuses instead on two things: the astonishment of Jesus' hearers and the driving out of an unclean spirit. The two accounts are entirely complementary and offer a rich insight into Jesus' ministry.

The two parts of Mark's story work together to make the same point: that Jesus has authority, both in what he says and in what he does. Words and actions are inseparable. Teaching in local synagogues at this time was in the hands of scribes, educated people who taught both the written law and the spoken tradition which surrounded it. Some would offer their own interpretation but for the most part they conveyed what others had said. The elders could invite anyone they thought competent to speak, and so Jesus was given his platform.

While it is frustrating not to be told what he taught by Mark we can fill in the blanks by referring to Luke, as well as by reference to other parts of Mark's gospel. By proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of God Jesus is invoking those Old Testament prophecies just as he does in Luke's account. No wonder his hearers are astonished; this is a fresh and radical message and one which

summons them to action – ‘repent and believe’. The world has changed and they need to respond.

We then discover that Jesus has authority not just to teach but to drive out demons. And tellingly, the unclean spirit recognises this authority, for it names him both as Jesus of Nazareth and as ‘the Holy One of God’. This isn’t a Messianic title from the Old Testament but it is an acknowledgement of Jesus’ divine power. And by using the plural in its two questions: ‘What do you want with us? Have you come to destroy us?’ the demon speaks in the name of all demons: Jesus is attacking and destroying the whole race. We saw him overcome Satan by resisting his temptations in the wilderness; now he is taking on the forces of evil and overcoming them too.

To emphasise the message, the astonishment of the people is restated: ‘He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.’ In chapter 4 we will hear the same formula after Jesus calms the storm: ‘Even the wind and the waves obey him!’, this time with a question: ‘Who is this?’ The answer was obvious to the unclean spirit and it is obvious to Mark’s readers because he has already told us. But it is a question which even Jesus’ closest followers continue to pose as they struggle to come to terms with the extraordinary fact: there is only one person who can subdue the forces of evil and the forces of nature, and that is God himself.

In Mark’s gospel Jesus never talks about himself, never gives himself titles: that is left to others. Nevertheless every part of Mark’s story makes claims about Jesus, and his whole ministry challenges men and women to choose whether to follow him or reject him. So we are challenged too. Mark confronts us with the Kingdom of God in action, and we have to decide whether to follow him or not.

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