

31 January 2021—The Fourth Sunday after The Epiphany: Mark 1:21-28

In today's Gospel, it is, ironically, the demon who identifies Jesus as "the Holy One of God." The term—Holy One of God—testifies to the intimate relationship between Jesus and the Father. The demons rightly assume Jesus comes to destroy them. In Mark's Gospel the evil inhabitants of the spiritual realm recognize who Jesus is, and invariably fear His presence and power to destroy them. Jesus casts them out after commanding their silence. This is not surprising: the assaults of evil usually involve lies and distracting, numbing noise.

This story turns our perspective of reality on its head. Here there is no relativism, post-modern comprehensiveness, or narcissistic angst. Rationalism, logical proof, empathetic hand holding is absent. Jesus is abruptly direct. Jesus is the Holy One of God, whose authority is self-revealed. This is consistent with God's Being. God is dependent on nothing apart from Godself. God needs no verification since God is the One who truly is, the source of all that is (cf. Exodus 3:14). And Jesus, the Holy One of God, shares perfectly and completely God's self-authenticating Being. As Colossians proclaims, *(Christ) is the image of the invisible God...he himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together...for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell...* (1:15, 17, 19).

Jesus confronts us with a spiritual reality all but lost to the smirking assumptions of our times. We ought neither smirk-along, nor attempt defensive nostalgia. The stories in which Jesus casts out demons bring us face to face with a reality of evil we would rather deny or ignore. We want to explain evil as a product of ignorance, poor choices, social instability, or unhealthy influences—which are real and affecting. Yet evil is not merely the result of ignorance or poor choices. Evil is rooted in the active attempts by what is contrary to God in the spiritual realm to invade and subvert the created realm from loving and serving the One who made all and is all.

The worst thing is to "go Hollywood." Most novels, films, and TV which deal with evil's assaults are nonsense at best and sadistic orgies of violence at worst. The most pernicious evil is not manifested by spinning heads and chainsaw toting psychopaths. Most pernicious is the "everyday evil" that entices, and whispers lies, only shouting when fearful.

What do we learn from today's Gospel? First, the demonic recognize the presence of God and work to pervert our attachment to God. We can recognize the pull of the demonic when we face a choice between what we know will please God and what will please us apart from God. Recognize this conflict and choose what centers your life in God. Ask: does this action, thought, word draw me closer to God or not?

Secondly, evil seldom leaves without struggle. We may be convulsed—spiritually, emotionally, even physically—as Jesus casts the demonic from us. This should not surprise or frighten us. The new, healthier way of living in God will need time to grow deep roots that will displace the old, rotten growth. We might very well need lots of plowing up, deep digging, and turning over which will not be comfortable for our old selves.

A third point: The most perverting strategy of evil is to convince us that Jesus' authority is limited or arbitrary. Evil can whisper: "He cannot cast us out. Haven't you asked, and nothing happened? Haven't you tried, and failed? Why struggle?" Perhaps, you have heard such whispers. Jesus will heal us, but we must keep showing up for the cure. Our creation is without our consent; our salvation is only with our consent. The deeper the wound, the deeper the healing required, and that takes time. Sometimes we want to be healed in theory but not in reality. St. Augustine once quipped, "Lord, make me holy; but not yet." Offer your doubts, your weakness, your mixed motives to God for healing.

Sometimes we want healing to be for a specific problem but want Jesus to keep his hands off the rest. For example, we want Jesus to heal our anger, but our greed and lust are none of God's business. We are trying to control God. Self-diagnosis and do-it-yourself surgery are ludicrous. Jesus will not heal part of us and leave the rest alone. Jesus yearns to heal the whole person.

Therefore, while a casual reading of the Scriptures may give the impression healing is an event, spiritual healing is a day-by-day seeking for and receiving of the divine life Jesus yearns to give us, transforming our minds, spirits, and bodies into the grace of God. Seek healing every day: begin each day with this desire and keep it before you always.

Jesus is the Holy One of God with authority and power over the demonic; may that authority and power be real in your life and my life.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, for ever and ever. Amen.