

“The Power of Jesus” a sermon based on Mark 1:21-28 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Epiphany 4, 1 February 2015, by Kerry Enright, Knox minister.

The first account of an unclean spirit appearing and being cast out is in a gathering like this: among a praying people on a holy day in a sacred space.

It seems that it is among us, that Jesus engages unclean spirits.

Why might that be?

Because there is potential here.

Here there is fertile ground for overcoming systems that destroy and despoil, addressing ideologies that demean and crush, confronting powers that lead people to do harm.

This is where struggle happens. This is where wrestling occurs. This is where spirits are engaged. This is where power confronts power, and authority challenges authority.

Why here in particular?

It's fertile ground because we subject ourselves to more than current orthodoxy.

We give authority to someone other than us.

We offer ourselves to a truth that is more than my truth, more than our truth, more than my tribal truth.

We are awakened to more than the spirit of the age.

Here we are questioned and challenged and disturbed by perspectives that do not come from our sources, our age, our circle, our family.

Here we are not the authority.

We do not hold the power.

We are not the ones who control.

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?”

The man recognised power. He sensed authority. He smelt the threat.

Have you come to destroy us? Are you going to take away what we have worked so hard to achieve? Are you going to remove our power, question our control, challenge our authority?

The man knew what was at stake.

So the man tries to put Jesus in his place, to control him by naming him, to relegate him.

“I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

I know who you are!

Systems are kept in place by people who know, people who are used to naming things, people who are used to exercising influence, used to putting things in their place, putting people in their place.

Jesus rebukes the man and addresses the spirit.

It's the spirit he addresses: "Be silent."

Isn't this the hardest achievement, to silence the unclean spirits?

To silence the power that maintains the system that keeps people in their place.

To silence the accepted truth - there might have been a time when we did not accept it, but it has been stated so consistently for so long we have given in, so this is now how things are ...

- Inequality
- Extreme poverty
- Unrestrained growth
- Environmental degradation

In the silence, Jesus addresses the unclean spirit - and let me add a few words - perhaps - Stop your naming. Stop categorising me. Stop relegating me. Stop taming me. Stop putting my power in its place, making me manageable, safe, boxed, private.

And stop controlling this man, ruling this man, overpowering this man, directing this man, blinding and constraining and directing this man.

Spirit, come out of him!

And the unclean spirit, convulsing the man, crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

Convulsing – it suggests that Jesus was not addressing just a part of us, not just a compartment of our lives, not just a dimension of our living – every part of us is affected – our spirits, our bodies, our minds.

Every part of us is involved.

The key note here is hope, not despair.

This is a gospel of great hope.

We can be released from the spirit that kills our planet.

We can be clean of the spirit that feeds inequality.

We can be free of the spirit that causes extreme poverty.

We do not need to be led by prevailing economic philosophies.

We do not need to be overwhelmed by ideologies that perpetuate discrimination.

We do not need to be bound by current orthodoxies.

There is a greater power who casts out unclean spirits.

Who puts us in our right mind.

Who enables us to be who we were created to be.

The spirits can leave us.

This of course is only the first of such struggles.

For authority is challenging authority, power is confronting power, God is dealing with spirits.

So much is at stake, that eventually the struggle will crucify Christ.

It is so easy to tame this text, to flatten it, to take away its significance.

We can do that by arguing about its historicity – did it really happen?

We can suggest that it really was a medical ailment that today a doctor would treat.

We can hint that Mark has over-done the drama and something less is at stake.

In contrast, Ched Myers - "Binding the Strong Man" - says this is an action full of signs, full of symbol, full of implication.

Last Friday's ODT included an article by Peter Matheson.

In many ways Peter's article was a commentary on this text.

Let me read part of what Peter wrote –

"A striking feature of New Zealand today is our tolerance of the intolerable: 1% of the world's population commanding 50% of its resources, manic housing prices, child poverty at extreme levels.

We shrug it off, like water off a duck's back. It doesn't engage us anymore. Have we become a culture of denial?

The way middle New Zealand shrugs off, and trivialises the ecological crisis signals the severity of the glued-shut-ears epidemic.

Is it a sense of disheartenment, of feeling disempowered? Is the ostrich mentality a desperate defence against the incessant clamour of the social and anti-social media, the stridency of buy-now, rush-along-today consumerism?"

Which might be depressing, except that Sunday by Sunday we name another authority.

We dare to believe there is a greater power, a life-giving, eye-opening, ear-opening, spirit-opening, soul-opening God.

And we reach into the stories of our past and into our own stories for sign after sign of that power, that life, that authority.

We have seen unclean spirits leaving.

We have experienced it in our own lives.

We know it happens.

In a moment we will baptise Margaret Jane.

We believe God puts God's own spirit into her life.

We believe through the stories of our past, through the company of God's people, and often despite us, through worship and Bible and prayer and action, that God is involved with Margaret Jane.

Margaret Jane will hear from people about the value of creation and how she can be part of cherishing it.

She will learn how to respect people of other faiths.

She will join in acting for justice.

In this and other ways Holy Spirit, God Spirit, Love, Life, Hope Spirit will overcome other spirits.

And so we entrust ourselves to that God and to the way of Jesus Christ.