

**Even unclean spirits obey, a sermon based on Mark 1:21-38 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin on the fourth Sunday after Epiphany 28 January 2018. Reference also to 1 Corinthians 8:1-13.**

I do not always bring my best to church. I sense I may not be alone. I wonder how many unclean spirits are present this morning. I think there are thousands.

For those of us with unclean spirits, today's gospel offers hope.

1 John 4 - There is no fear in love; perfect love casts out fear.

Perfect love casts out more than fear.

Jesus is very matter of fact in this story.

He utters only seven words:

“Be silent, and come out of him.”

Ahh, you might think, that is typical Mark – few words, straight to the point.

What about the others?

Matthew and Luke have exactly the same words. The effort of Jesus is minimal. It is the spirit that is wordy. The spirit knows with what it is dealing.

It is as if Mark wants us to we feel the Spirit's fear, hear the resistance, notice its cynical tone, its dripping sarcasm.

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God?”

To what unclean spirit within us, here, today, does Jesus address his words?

Many writers see this is as one incident in a life-long engagement with the powers, the powers of the Empire, the powers that eventually crucify Jesus, and in the face of which Jesus is raised to life.

Ched Myers says Jesus' action is of a political character. Jesus is dealing to the structures of power and alienation in the social world. We might call them the globalised fake truths we imbibe and live by, often unknowing. Fake truths like consumerism, individualism, racism, sexism. As Myers says - “The unclean spirit clearly understands the threat Jesus poses to the status quo.”

I remembered what Robert Oppenheimer said about nuclear weapons, how something he thought would be helpful was turned to evil. Oppenheimer was a physicist and was called the father of the nuclear bomb.

He wrote this:

Despite the vision and farseeing wisdom of our wartime heads of state, the physicists have felt the peculiarly intimate responsibility for suggesting, for supporting, and in the end, in large measure, for achieving the realization of atomic weapons. Nor can we forget that these weapons as they were in fact used dramatized so mercilessly the inhumanity and evil of modern war. In some sort of crude sense which no vulgarity, no humor, no overstatement can quite extinguish, the physicists have known sin; and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose.

*Physics in the Contemporary World*, Arthur D. Little Memorial Lecture at M.I.T. (25 November 1947)

Oppenheimer was naming an unclean spirit.

The apostle Paul highlights how knowledge and food, worthy in themselves, can be turned to improper use, so they become idols, unclean spirits. Unclean spirits can wreak havoc and do much damage.

Over the summer I read 200 pages of Vincent O'Malley's 600 page history of the Waikato wars.

O'Malley insists there need never have been a war. Many in the government and many wise figures felt that the Maori chiefs offered reasonable terms to the Crown, terms that could have been accepted.

But Governor Grey was stubborn and he wanted to rid our land of the King Movement. He would never accept anything less than complete victory, complete eradication. So we had a war. In the end, of course, the King Movement survived.

It seems the unclean spirit of acquisitiveness, took hold of Governor Grey to the great detriment of our nation. Such spirits are evident around us. The fascination with guns in one country. The treatment of aboriginal people in another. The snail pace of addressing climate change. The gross inequality by

which last year \$8 of every \$10 of new wealth went to the top 1% of our world, when \$8 needs to go to the lowest 1%.

These spirits though take up residence inside us – they are not over there.

Debie Thomas says:

Sometimes our “unclean spirits” take up residence in our holy places. That is, we carry our destructive habits and tendencies right into our churches, our friendships, our families, and our workplaces. Sometimes our demons — our fears, our addictions, our sins, and our compulsions — recognize Jesus first because they know that an encounter with him will change everything. So they make us recoil as soon as he shows up in the guise of a loving friend, or a provocative sermon, or a pricked conscience. Sometimes our lives actually get *harder* when we move towards faith and healing, because unclean spirits always fight the hardest when their time is up.

What possesses us? What wreaks havoc in our hearts and minds? What distorts our humanity? These forces might not leave our lives without a fight, but the Jesus of Mark’s Gospel will do battle for us if we’ll let him. Will we?

The hymn we are about to sing puts it like this:

Lord, the demons still are thriving  
in the grey cells of the mind:  
Tyrant voices shrill and driving,  
twisted thoughts that grip and bind,  
Doubts that stir the heart to panic,  
fears distorting reason's sight,  
Guilt that makes our loving frantic,  
dreams that cloud the soul with fright.

Tyrant voices that twist our thoughts, that grip and bind, that turn reason to prejudice, prudence to inaction, caution to stubbornness. Fear is perhaps the most powerful of unclean spirits. Fear of loss, fear of strangers, fear of losing control, fear of judgement, fear of newness. Such spirits do not leave without a struggle. Even in places of love, in families of love. Yet that is what sacred places are for. That is what church is for.

Mark ties that liberation to teaching. Those that saw what happened were amazed at how Jesus taught with authority. Teaching that exorcised spirits. Teaching that speaks to where our behaviour is formed. Teaching that shapes conscience, awakening our virtues. Teaching that communicates love, letting us be absolutely honest. Teaching that spotlights spirits and lets them go. This is a story that describes my own experiences.

Sermons that that question me, that invite me to consider my life in face of the life of Jesus. Conversations with trusted friends, who question me, and help me see myself.

Scripture where a story or a word or phrase holds up a mirror to us. A realisation that comes in a time of prayer and reflection, in the light of Jesus. Writing that informs my living and questions my commitments. Groups that surround me with love, before whom I can be honest and open, and let go.

In such a setting I heard a voice come from deep inside me, and a fear that threatened to take hold of me, left me as I was surrounded by people of love and prayer and faith.

I pray for us, that we may be a community in which Jesus speaks to our unclean spirits – “Be silent, and come out of him, her, them.”

And they leave.

In those words are great hope.

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