

**“What have you to do with us?” a sermon based on Mark 1:21-28 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 31 January 2021 by Kerry Enright.**

A first person sermon ... “My name is Hezekiah. I know – you heard my name last Sunday when I was a fisherman. By way of explanation, I can only say I keep popping up. I was in the synagogue that day - not like the synagogues you know now - this was a long time ago, first century, before the Temple was destroyed. The synagogue was a meeting place, a teaching and talking-place, a place where judgements were given. So it was familiar to us all, but that day it was a sabbath day and a sacred place.

**A familiar place with a familiar routine.** We were there expecting what always happened, the same routine, interesting, helpful, but pretty much the same. Reading the Torah, teaching the commandments. The scribes trying to be faithful in translating and interpreting. I was sitting on one of the benches around the wall. And in the middle there was a stand on which the Torah sat, from which the law was read and from which the scribes instructed us. Over there sat Mr Smith. He sat near the front because he couldn’t hear so well. And over there sat the Browns. Their family had sat on that bench for many years. And over there sat young Jones. Learning the faith. I could tell you about nearly every person there, and they knew me.

**The prophet came in.** Any Jewish man could speak in the synagogue, so we were not surprised, although we had not heard him before. Immediately I noticed the difference. The sense of immediacy and urgency. He expected our lives to change, to change soon. He spoke with authority, not claimed or demanded, not presumed or assumed. I could tell people listened to his message. He spoke about a new realm just round the corner, just down the road, near at hand, present. He spoke as if something was at stake. I could tell he was trying to be true, to speak truth. I thought of those words from our past – “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.”

**As he spoke, he changed the atmosphere.** We were more on edge, more nervous perhaps, the heart beating faster. There was tension, as if something was about to happen. And it did.

**One of us cried out.** I cannot remember who it was now, because we were focused on the prophet. But among our number, a person who valued the scribes, cried out. “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” It was the question we were all asking in a way because Jesus was no scribe. It was the question the scribes would have asked if they had been there. Asked because his way was different, challenging, even disturbing. So I wasn’t surprised at the opposition, stiff opposition, harsh, strident opposition. “What do we have in common?’ You have come here from Nazareth – the man almost spat out the name of the town. “We have nothing in common. You are not one of us. Are you trying to dismantle what we have put in place, disturb the status quo, upend what we value? Why do you meddle with us, with our way of doing things?” Awkward. But I tell you this, everyone was awake. He was threatening the powers that decided how things were done, the people who were in control

**I could have sat there, on the side, watching.** I could have thought the man was deranged, disturbed, irrational. I could have crept away embarrassed at the fuss. I could have said – this isn’t about me – Let them argue it out. But I noticed a word the man said ... us. He asked Jesus - “What have you to do with us?” I am one of the us. Why was I implicated?

**Well I was torn.** On the one hand were the scribes I trusted, knew, relied on. On the other an unfamiliar prophet, speaking directly of a new way. He faced me with a choice, a different centre of authority, a different kind of power. He was wresting control from a system that enslaved and oppressed us. I use the word power, but I know it is an awkward word. You know about the ability of powers to take hold of us, don’t you? We are full of powers – aren’t we? Some call them spirits – not literally, but in terms of what we absorb from the culture around us, the society in which we exist, what enslaves us, claims us. You New Zealanders know what that is like for spirits to wrestle with each other. I happens on your maraes, as the elders speak and the visitors respond, in the toing and froing, in the words spoken, but more than mere words. Powers, old and

long and established powers swirl around. Ancient forces rise to the surface. Histories that shape us wrestle with each other, as one set of leaders uphold one tradition over another, set one part of history against another part of our history.

**That's what happens in sacred spaces at sacred times.** That's what happens in places like this and times like this. The power of Jesus wrestles with the powers that rule our lives. Jesus engages spirits in places like synagogues and churches. This is what happens here when we gather.

**That day was a breakthrough!** In addressing the spirit, Jesus broke the shackles of our imaginations. I realised how much I had been enslaved, and what liberation felt like. I found myself not distant or removed, but addressed, engaged, disturbed. And I began to make connections between what was said and what was happening around me. The systems that excluded and discriminated against people. The powers that determined who would be poor and who would be rich. The church authorities that determined some were acceptable and some were not. The people who imagine that they can control what God does with God's church.

**Jesus broke open my imagination that day, and he's been doing it ever since.** I am beginning to imagine God's different world. But the shackles on my imagination are not broken without a casting out, a making room. God has to make space in my imagination for God's world to break in. Racism, misogyny, injustice, homophobia, cowardice, discrimination of all kinds— we've absorbed them. What a relief when Jesus speaks to them in me ... Be silent and come out of him! He keeps saying. How does it happen though? For some it is when they face facts. New Zealanders who see the graph of inequality that widened from 1991. When people who spend time with prisoners or refugees. When our eyes are opened to how hetero-centric we are, when we listen to someone with a disability that marginalises. Sometimes it's through learning more. Sometimes it's through awkward questioning. Sometimes it's through loving exploration. In that and more ways, the way of God casts out unclean spirits.

**“Be silent, and come out of him!”** I thank God for a synagogue where I hear Jesus saying it, even when it puts me on the spot, provided its in the context of an atmosphere of loving. So I keep coming to the synagogue, week by week, expecting to be amazed, astounded, examined. Because even the unclean spirits obey him. So Jesus, please keep saying to the unclean spirits that have hold of my life – be silent and come out of him. And keep pouring into my life the good Spirit, your Spirit, the spirit of love and life, of justice and truth.

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