

# Fourth Sunday After Epiphany

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## Introduction

In this gospel passage we meet Jesus at the beginning of His ministry. He is introduced to us by Mark as someone who is not afraid of conflict. In fact He steps straight into a confrontation with an unclean spirit. It is not surprising that Mark introduces us to Jesus in this way, as throughout his Gospel there is an urgency and a directness about Jesus and His ministry, pointing us always to our need to take note of his authority. It is from this authority and presence in the midst of our suffering and conflicts that Jesus sets us free.

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## Text

### The Man with an Unclean Spirit

They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "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." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

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## Comment

This passage comes right at the beginning of Mark's gospel, and of Jesus' ministry. Jesus has been baptized by John the Baptist, he has called fishermen to follow him, and now they go to Capernaum to begin ministry. We tend to remember the first time we met someone, especially if they become someone special to us. We may be struck by what they were doing, how they looked, what they said. First impressions matter. They can set the tone for the relationship, for how things might progress. The gospel writers knew that. And so very early on, right at the beginning in fact, they each set the tone for who Jesus is, what he might do, and how the relationship with him might progress. In Matthew's gospel, we meet Jesus as a teacher. In Luke, Jesus is a healer, liberator, on the side of the oppressed and poor. In John's gospel, Jesus brings grace and life in abundance. And in Mark, our first glimpse of Jesus as he begins his ministry is as he enters a conflict. Mark tells us that Jesus acts with

authority, and the unclean spirit obeys and comes out of the man. Jesus also taught in the synagogue 'with authority', and we are told that the people are 'amazed' at this 'new teaching'. 'He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him!' As a result, Jesus's fame spreads far and wide.

In this passage then, we meet Jesus who is not afraid of confrontation. Our first impression is of a person who has come among us to meet us where we are, in suffering and dis-ease. In conflict. And he quickly and clearly lays down some boundaries. He brings in a new way of being and relating. He teaches on the Sabbath. He teaches very differently from the scribes. And he leaves us in no doubt of his intention as he exorcises an unclean spirit. This is Jesus who has come to oppose what is not of God. Who has come to teach us what really matters. To make us hear and see and relate in this new way. And there is an urgency in this passage, which is repeated by the writer of Mark's gospel over and over again as we read further.

As I write this, I have on my desk a small model of Jesus on the cross. One arm is broken off, and both feet are missing. It is rather crudely made out of plastic. It was given to me by a soldier in northern Iraq who had found it on the ground next to a house that had been destroyed by shelling. I was on a peace walk during Holy Week and Easter in Northern Iraq, in Kurdistan. About 20 of us from Europe walked with local Christians, Muslims and Yazidis.

We walked for peace, to proclaim the possibility of peace in that fought over space. On Good Friday we visited a village about 30km from Mosul that had been destroyed by ISIS, the villagers having all fled or worse. It was a place of destruction, completely devoid of life. Houses were rubble, shops damaged, and the church though still standing had been desecrated, the altar broken and lying in rubble. We could hear Mosul being shelled. I held a Good Friday service in the desecrated church. We laid candles that we had brought with us in the shape of a cross in front of the destroyed altar and prayed the prayers of Good Friday and the Coventry Litany of Reconciliation for healing, for the end to that conflict, for peace. It was extraordinarily desolate. And there it was that the soldier handed me the broken Jesus. In the midst of suffering and conflict and pain. Despair to hope, hostility to peace, conflict to reconciliation.

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## Response

The Jesus who Mark shows us in this reading puts himself in to a place of confrontation. He is to be found amidst the mess of conflict, of suffering. And moreover, he is with us when we find ourselves in that place too. It is in the places of conflict that Jesus acts, where he teaches us how to follow him. In the mess of that battered, destroyed village in Iraq, there was Jesus...battered and broken himself on the ground, but right there. In the midst of despair he turned up. In his dealings with a possessed man, he enabled him to be free.

God draws close to us in conflict, when we are afraid and messed up. He brings in a new way of being in the midst of conflict. Mark puts this story right at the beginning of his gospel so that our first impression of Jesus is of someone who is with us right at the heart of conflict, and crucially, from that place of brokenness, sets us free.

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## Prayer

**Coventry Litany of Reconciliation**

*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*

The hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class,

FATHER FORGIVE

The covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not their own,

FATHER FORGIVE

The greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth,

FATHER FORGIVE

Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others,

FATHER FORGIVE