

Commentary on Deuteronomy 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 7:32-35;
Mark 1:21-28

Back in 2008 I was a hospital chaplain in Hackney. I would drive in from Hornchurch, listening to my favourite radio station, Radio 4, and the Today Programme, with John Humphrys...those were the days! Well, one morning as I was driving along, I heard a report from the Secular Society, who were trying to make the case that hospitals should not pay for religious chaplains and that if people needed a chaplain their own local religious leader should come to the hospital for free. I was rather peeved by this, to say the least! I stopped the car and phoned radio 4 and to my surprise I got through to someone! And not only that they listened to me as I said ‘ as a chaplain I serve patients and staff of all faiths and none, that I never knew what I was going in to, that most of the people I was asked to visit didn’t have a local vicar because they didn’t go to church and that every month I had to take all the baby funerals from the hospital’. The person I spoke to, then said, ‘I see, could we call you back?’ I drove into work and an executive from radio 4 called and asked if I would do ‘a day in the life of a hospital chaplain’ Well, the journalist Angus Stickler, a sound man and camera man met me 2 weeks later at 8.30am in forest gate crematorium for the cremation of a baby and they stayed with me til 6pm. I felt very proud of the final programme as it was sensitive, honest and affirming of hospital chaplaincy, demonstrating what a chaplain is called to do, and that is to bring the peace of God into those fearful, life changing moments, for patients and staff. Bringing Christ’s healing love into difficult, situations.

A day in the life of a hospital chaplain.

If you were to think about your job or the job you had before retirement what would an average day have looked like if someone came to record it? What would you want them to record?

Our gospel reading this morning is a day in the life of Jesus, the son of God.

Mark records all the events that happen in Jesus’ eventful day. Jesus joins in public worship, he teaches, he heals, he drives out evil spirits – and he prays privately. Mark also records the reactions of those experiencing his ministry, all of which provokes very different reactions, from his own disciples, religious leaders, and people from his local community and interestingly, it is those local people who show the most insight and understanding of Jesus.

The day being recorded, is a normal Sabbath day, where Jesus, as a devout Jew, attends synagogue. What happened at a synagogue is very similar to today. Psalms are sung, scripture is read aloud and prayers are said. At the time of Jesus services were simple, often with a sermon or explanation of scripture. There was no formal clergy, as they would have been in the Temple in Jerusalem, which for many Jews was only accessible to them once a year as it was so far away. Synagogue gatherings for the local community, was very important.

In the synagogue, anyone could be invited to get up and preach and on this particular Sabbath day, Jesus was invited. Perhaps he already had a name as a speaker, but on this occasion, as soon as he opens his mouth the people feel immediately confident in what he says, this is someone different. Most of the time the Scribes, who were the experts in the Law, were the ones to preach but they mainly explained the given understanding in the sacred books. But Jesus spoke with a new kind of ‘authority.’ He was different. Somehow the people realised that he was not giving out someone else’s teaching. He was giving his own.

But Jesus doesn't only speak with authority, he acts with authority as well. And just as he spoke, a man with an 'unclean or evil spirit' speaks to Jesus. What does this mean?

Well, it could mean all manner of things. I work for the Bishop as a deliverance minister, and part of our work is to discern what is happening when someone experiences odd, paranormal activity in their home or around the people they live with. At the time of Jesus if someone behaved strangely, had a psychotic episode, was epileptic, manic depression, or acted in ways that meant they were 'outside' the normal patterns of behaviour, they could have been classed as having an unclean spirit. This term was used because the persons behaviour usually meant they couldn't take part in the religious activities that made people ritually clean, so they were cast out of their community, excluded.

Today as deliverance ministers, we see different behaviours and phenomena, we listen to people's stories and try to get to the root of their problem. We then pray with them and for them, we seek God's guidance through scripture and the sacrament of communion may be offered, all which is to bring comfort, reassurance, peace and healing to anxious, fearful people and situations. One Bishop said, this ministry is 'an extension of Christ's Kingdom and a demonstration of the power of the resurrection to overcome evil and replace it with good.'

At the time of Jesus, there was a very strong belief in the spirit world, and the powers it had over human beings. There was a genuine fear of this power and what evil spirits could do. The biggest problem was probably the fear of an evil spirit than the spirit itself. And that's probably still true today. In Uganda, I visited the Bishop of the Congo and he told me that he regularly found people chained to his fence because others were afraid of the person having an evil spirit in them, and that somehow that spirit could get them

too! To some extent, people are fearful of evil spirits in this country, we don't generally see people chained to Bishops fences, but we don't see people walking through cemeteries at night either. And yet we have also seen a rise in the number of people interested in and joining Wicca, to the extent that there are Wicca Chaplains in hospitals and universities now.

Whether you think this is all a bit mumbo jumbo, I do believe there are evil forces in our world, we see and hear of evil things being done by individuals and by whole groups that cause others to suffer, sometimes such heinous acts are reported that they can only be described as evil. But is it a bad person carrying out such acts or a spirit of evil in them? Perhaps that's just a cop out for a person's bad behaviour?

So on this day in Jesus' life, did Jesus cast out an evil spirit from this man? Whatever it was that bound him so tightly, Jesus set him free and restored him to health and to his community. As Christians we should always remember that Christ has the victory over evil, he has the power to cast out fear and restore peace, to cast out darkness and bring in light. That's why prayer and covering our actions, our meetings, our plans, our family, the country, our leaders with prayer, in Jesus' name is so important. But we have a responsibility as well, when claiming the victory of Christ. If we live a life that is outside of Jesus' teaching, if we live a life that is self-centred and not Christ centred, we give evil a way in, and allow destructive thoughts and behaviour to manifest themselves, which could take hold. If you've ever been close to someone with an addiction problem of some kind, you will know what I mean. St. Paul says 'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.' Paul is saying his life is lived for Jesus.

Maybe you've heard '*You Can't Cheat an Honest Man*' meaning that a truly honest person would never put themselves in a position where a cheat could get an advantage and manage to cheat them. Likewise, when our life is centred on Christ, evil gets no foothold on us because our life itself is claiming the victory of Christ and our prayers will naturally flow out of that relationship. Now having a Christ centred life does not mean impunity from bad things happening, but it does mean we can cope with them better when they come. We are not bound up or brought down by them.

What are the fears that bind us up, restricts us and holds us back from being the person God wants us to be? It's important that we identify our fears and see them for what they are. Once we recognise them, we can ask Jesus to help us overcome them. As we overcome more and more fears, we become more and more liberated, and learn to trust in Christ's authority over our lives, every day. You may be sitting here thinking none of this affects me, is relevant to me, but you may have someone in your family it is relevant to. It's important we know how and what to pray for those we care about who are struggling with life, especially when they become bound by destructive behaviour.

Remember, Jesus' authority is not about controlling us, he said 'I have not come to be served but to serve'; I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

Jesus came, to set us free, to make us free, so that we can live a life free from fear, compulsions, self-centredness, anger, resentment, hostility and violence, all of which prevent us from living how God wants us to live, in peace and at peace. Let us pray that we and those we love, enjoy that freedom each day of our lives. Amen