

Epiphany 6 Year B 2021

We are still in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel, and already we have had three stories about healing - and plenty more to come.

Two weeks ago, we heard Mark's account of an exorcism in the Capernaum synagogue on the Sabbath, when Jesus set free a man held in captivity by 'an unclean spirit'. He commands the unclean spirit to 'come out'. Those present, we are told, were amazed - not by the exorcism but by the teaching - 'with authority'. Being possessed, the man should not have been in the synagogue - he was 'unclean', but Jesus' actions return him to the worshipping community.

Immediately afterwards (how Mark loves this word 'immediately') Jesus goes to the house of Simon and Andrew, probably rooms gathered around a courtyard for an extended family, where Simon's mother-in-law is ill. This time, there is no word of command; Jesus simply takes the woman by the hand, and she is cured, able to return to her rightful place in the social setting of the household, 'and she began to serve them'. Should she have done that on the Sabbath? Doubtful.

As the Sabbath ends, the people come, looking for healing. I don't suppose the religious authorities come, nor the rich or the

'respectable' people. Surely it would have been the poor, the marginalised, those whom the respectable would have shunned or avoided? So, the very people for whom Jesus had come to proclaim the kingdom of God, in support of the dominated, and to challenge the dominators. The following morning, whilst he was at prayer, Simon comes to find Jesus - 'Everyone is searching for you' - but Jesus is keen to move on, to the neighbouring towns, in order to proclaim his message.

It is on that journey that he is sought out by a leper - an untouchable, a social outcast, someone forced to live 'outside the camp' (see Lev.13-14). 'If you choose, you can make me clean'.

That would suggest that he has no doubt about Jesus' ability to cure him of his disease - in a sense, that is a declaration of faith - what he doubts is Jesus' willingness to cure him - 'if you choose'. Has he lived outside the camp for so long, lived with the stigma of contagion and the lack of human contact that he doubts anyone would want to help him? (It feels a bit like we treated homosexuals when AIDS was first diagnosed, doesn't it?) 'If you choose, you can make me clean'. Is he begging Jesus (he is kneeling in front of him) or is he challenging him - 'have you got the courage to do this for me?' - and in the translation we have

today (from NRSV) Jesus is 'moved with pity' - which seems what we would expect, but in other translations and manuscripts 'filled with compassion' and even 'full of anger'.

Let's go back to Leviticus. According to the rules laid down there, if someone had had a contagious skin disease (usually called leprosy, but it could have been other things) and then appeared to be healed, he had to go to a priest for ritual cleansing, and only after the ritual had been completed, could he be declared clean, and allowed back 'into the camp', into society, into normal life. Only a priest had the authority to do this. So, if Jesus made the leper clean, he was usurping the prerogative of a priest, the priest who had the power and authority to affirm or deny the cleansing. Is that what makes Jesus angry, the subjection of the suffering by the powerful, in the name of his Father? Is he angry about a domination system which has no flexibility or care for those in need, a system where the law enforcers are the law makers, to their own advantage?

Whatever, whether Jesus is full of compassion or full of anger, he does the unthinkable - he touches the man! This should not lead to healing, it should lead to contamination! Jesus has now become ritually, if not physically, unclean, and should himself go

to the priest and pay for his ritual cleansing. Yet he takes to himself the authority to cleanse - who gives him that authority? Much of Mark's Gospel is about authority - the authority Jesus receives from his father, the authority of the Jewish religious elite, the authority they receive through their collaboration with Imperial Rome, and the authority (or should that be the power) of Satan and the forces of evil.

But then Jesus appears to step back - telling the (former) leper to tell no-one but to go to the priest and make the offering required by law. Is that because, at this early stage of his Galilean mission, he doesn't want confrontation with the authorities, or because he doesn't want the crowd setting the agenda (which might be why he left Capernaum). Either way, the man disobeys and goes out to spread the word - to proclaim the gospel - that he is no longer at the mercy of disease, nor at the mercy of the law and a priest - he is no longer excluded, but included in the kingdom of God.

And so - it is game on!

The people were amazed at Jesus' teaching 'with authority'. They had witnessed the healing of many at the house of Simon. But now - had he gone too far?

By touching and cleansing the leper, a priestly prerogative, Jesus has stepped into the territory of the ruling class. That could only lead to conflict.

Unfortunately, we have to pause the story there because we will, from next Sunday, be using the Lent readings. But Mark's Gospel isn't very long, so you could pick up the story for yourself - look for 'immediately/at once', look for 'authority', look for conflict, and ask 'What is Mark trying to tell us about the one who asks 'Who do you say that I am?'