

Proper 9 Year B 2021

In today's Gospel reading, Mark again explores the nature of Jesus' authority, his kingship, his kingdom. For the third time, Mark seeks to answer the question asked by the disciples after the stilling of the storm - 'Who then is this?'

Those gathered in the synagogue in Nazareth on that Sabbath morning knew well enough the answer to that question - 'Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?' They have clearly heard about his activities - 'What deeds of power are being done by his hands!' - but they cannot accept that the wood worker, the chap who had fixed their house or made their furniture, could be anything other than 'one of us'. They cannot subscribe to 'local boy makes good'; rather they are fixated on 'who does he think he is?' Envy and resentment begin to be mixed with grudging pride in his success. And look at his companions!

And then he stands up to preach in the synagogue - it is like inviting him to fail - read a text and explain it. Surely you will make a mess of that! And they take offence at his words. Who does he think he is, to try to teach them? Wasn't he here as a boy? It happens. They wanted something more spectacular, perhaps more complicated, more sophisticated than the village

handyman. And his message was too simple. Love. Love God. Love one another. Love yourself. Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. Visit the sick. Simple. Surely it has to be much more complicated than this? Jesus' message won't do.

They are not willing to accept Jesus' teaching because to do so would challenge the social conventions and certainties of their village life. So, because of their unbelief, Jesus is powerless to help them. They have answered the question 'Who then is this?' with rejection.

And so we come to the second part of the reading, which seems at first reading to be totally disconnected from the first part. The disciples have followed Jesus to Nazareth, and now they follow him into the neighbouring villages, from where he sends them out with authority over unclean spirits. They have asked 'Who then is this?' but seem now to have sufficient faith to accept this commission and to carry it out. Like Ezekiel, being told to stand up, listen and then go, the disciples accept the authority Jesus bestows upon them, take responsibility for their part in his mission to Galilee, casting out many demons and bringing healing to those they encounter.

So again, Mark answers his own question - 'Who then is this?'

This is the one who has authority over the natural order - the stilling of the storm.

This is the one who has authority over life and death, and over the Jewish Law - Jairus' daughter and the woman with the haemorrhage.

This is the one who has authority over unclean spirits - today's reading.

And this is the one who exercises this authority with love and gentleness - 'peace, be still', to the raging sea; 'daughter' to the marginalised, ostracised woman, 'give her something to eat' to the parents of the little girl.

And this authority he shares with those who follow him - we now have a share in the authority of Jesus because we follow him - and with this authority comes responsibility. As disciples of Jesus we have the responsibility to proclaim the good news, to heal the sick (not as doctors or nurses, but as loving companions) and to claim victory over evil in all its manifestations.

And if you think that might be a difficult thing to do, remember the experience of Jesus in Nazareth - total rejection, such that he could do no works of power, except heal a few sick people.

Perhaps Mark is trying here to stress the humanity of Jesus, in comparison to the next part of the story, which emphasises his divinity. When Jesus sends out his disciples he tells them that it will not always be plain sailing, they won't always be successful.

'If they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them'.

We are not responsible for the results of our discipleship - but we are responsible for our faithfulness to that discipleship. This is not about persuading people to come to church on Sunday morning, growing the congregation (although that would be wonderful). Proclaiming the good news of Jesus is an act of love, sharing with others what God means to you, how it helps to have Jesus in your life, how your faith sustains you in times of trouble and enlivens you in times of joy. There is no need for embarrassment or for feeling inadequate. You don't have to have a degree in theology to do that - I don't have a degree in theology! You simply have to believe what Mark says in Chapter one, verse one - the answer to the persistent question 'Who then is this?' He is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And that is Good News! Go out and proclaim it.

'Who? Me?' you may say. But Jesus has faith in you. Faith that you can use the gifts you have been given to help bring in the kingdom. 'Who? Me?' "Yes. You". Are you being called to be a peace maker, to proclaim the Gospel, to be a healer, a carer, a missionary (not somewhere else, but here), to be a prophet, an apostle, a priest? The Bible could be called *The Book of Who? Me?* Ezekiel, Isaiah and many more of the OT prophets. Mary. Elizabeth. Nicodemus. The Apostles. Mary Magdalene, the apostle to the apostles, St Paul, St Andrew, St Regulus. And down the ages, those known to us and those known only to God, who answered the question 'Who? Me?' in the affirmative. 'Who then is this?' He is the one calling you to faithful, active discipleship.