

Astounded. Amazed. A new teaching. There are a lot of reactions rolled in to the first of Jesus public encounters as Mark’s gospel records them.

Rather than taking up where John left off (after John’s arrest) on the banks of the Jordan, Jesus combs the beach for companions and heads to Capernaum. And he hits town with a flourish. In to the synagogue - with authority - with intent; and no time for nonsense. This diversion - this nay-sayer - ‘possessed by an unclean spirit’ - challenges the new authority; ***and this new authority rescues the possessed person from the distraction of disinformation.***

A word on this ‘unclean spirit...’ Listen again to the recorded reaction of this singular voice in the crowd; a person speaking with a different kind of astonishment: “What have YOU to do with US, Jesus of NAZARETH? (Can anything good come out of Nazareth - Nathaniel to Phillip - John 1:46) “Have you come to destroy us?”

When a new idea comes to light - a new approach threatens familiar patterns of faith - doesn’t it often feel like a threat? Who among us hasn’t argued against change - even if only in the privacy of our own thoughts? Do we, perhaps, work up the courage to challenge the person who offers the new idea - because ideas are difficult to threaten, so we target the people who articulate those ideas...

Strong ideas and capable speakers can handle these debates, and lively debate is good. Screaming antagonism and the presentation of the fear-driven, ‘we’ve never done it that way before’ argument is not helpful. Jesus knows the difference between these diverse reactions.

Without a word of his sermon on record we cannot know what provoked such strong reactions. Or maybe all of their initial astonishment has been given voice by this single, ‘possessed’ individual. And Jesus shuts down the negative spin and dispossesses the man of his fear and negativity. And now, the crowd is free to wonder. “What is this...he commands ***even the unclean spirits***, and they obey him...”

Jesus authority may be the very thing that Deuteronomy calls to mind - a prophet like Moses - who speaks with God’s permission - with God’s authority. You’ll know the prophet is legit if what the prophet says happens. Otherwise, relax and ignore those who speak and it doesn’t happen. (The prophet who speaks out of turn is condemned anyway...Deuteronomy 18:20) That Deuteronomy passage may well be the measure of the ‘new teaching’ that Jesus brought to the synagogue that day, and the proof seems to have been in the doing.

This ‘exorcism’ (such as it was) cements Jesus authority over **even the unclean spirits**. This is big. This is new. This is miles beyond preaching only to the converted - in the established mainstream of so many faith communities where the word is meant to affirm those on the inside and condemn those who don’t believe. Is that what Jesus does? Is that how the ministry begins here in Capernaum? What do you think of that?

The radical idea that God might care enough to be ‘with us’ - completely and unashamedly present in the person of Jesus - causes problems for faithful people to this day. For if God is present - if, in Jesus we are confronted by the most creative, compassionate, most loving [force] in all creation - then we have to re-evaluate our own importance.

Faithful people especially imagine that their efforts toward faithfulness offer them some sort of elevated status. We (I include myself) are always looking for ways to ‘reach out’ - to serve the community - the world - in a way that might reflect well on God **and on ourselves**. But here is Jesus; in our midst - God-made-flesh - tramping the roads with the suddenly unemployed and touching the untouchable and caring for those that, most times, the faithful only mention as potential projects for community improvement.

The work of God that Jesus revealed to the world did not start in the boardrooms of the synagogues and temple precincts. Jesus stirred up anxiety in the community of the faithful by bringing real life in to the worship space.

The church often stands accused of existing for itself. Membership drives and building projects - catechisms and creeds - all these are ‘designed’ to get people to fall in line. We baptize people who agree with our principles (do you promise to believe what we believe, and follow the rules we say we follow...) The churches’ detractors claim that we’ve created an exclusive club. In some cases, that may be true.

It is a club that, for the last eleven months, has been operating around a variety of fears. We’re afraid of what this extended pandemic is doing to us - to our institutions - to our mental health - to our ‘effectiveness as the church.’ Some of these fears are legitimate - others are groundless. And in light of this morning’s gospel, I wonder what would happen if Jesus breezed in to town to take a service?

If Jesus stood in our midst and offered hope - or counselled patience - or offered to reinterpret our present situation in light of God’s magnificence - what would happen? Would people scream about the ‘injustice’ of government restrictions? And if they did, would Jesus quiet their fear and cast out the demon of their selfishness?

The church has always been an imprecise organization, modelled on an imperfect understanding of who Jesus is and what Jesus asks. When we try to be anything else - when we claim authority that is not legitimate; when we profess certainty that has no foundation; when we resist the present reality because our fear about the future, we become something other than the church - we cease to follow Jesus.

Jesus authority - then and now - comes from his relationship to God. Our creeds and confessions don’t matter to him. Our wonder and amazement that a brand new thing could happen in our midst - in spite of our objections and fears - that wonder and amazement is what feeds faith and turns faith into action.

Don’t be afraid that God is doing a new thing; be amazed, and watch what happens next.