



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Our ministry mandate

By Rev Dr Keith Garner

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Mark 1:21-28

21 They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. **22** The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. **23** Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, **24** "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are--the Holy One of God!" **25** "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" **26** The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. **27** The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching--and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." **28** News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

At the beginning of a new year, we remind ourselves as a congregation (as well as individuals) that we are called to a distinct purpose – and particularly for those of us who offer leadership within the Christian community, it is these priorities which will help to keep us in touch with our core values and our God-given calling.

We are very different, but I trust united in a common understanding that what brings us together is our concern to be the very best we can be, supporting one another to serve God in this unique challenge of being a gathered Christian community in this most distinctive city.

There has never been a more challenging time for those engaged in city centre ministry and this is something that is underscored for me as I visit churches in different parts of the world. The challenge of a Sunday evening congregation holds so many tests and trials.

The decline of Sunday evening worship did not begin of late. I recall 38 years ago, at theological college in Bristol, writing a paper on the defence of Sunday evening worship and then presenting it to my peers ... an interesting exercise!

The challenge in the United Kingdom is not unfamiliar in our own Australian setting – in fact somewhat more advanced! What it means more than anything else is that we require:

- A continuity of ministry and service
- A partnership that enables us to make a difference
- An openness to welcome the new life that we discover in others.

The challenge is increasingly apparent as we recognise:

- The prevailing secularisation of our culture
- The obvious materialism that surrounds us
- The conflicting world views which emerge from both our culture and context

As I turn to the scripture setting of Mark 1, we are introduced by the gospel writer to a series of events which give a clear pointer to the nature of Jesus' ministry. The setting has been made clear in the call of Jesus' first disciples by the Sea of Galilee – an account which portrays Jesus as One who is vested with such authority as to make great demands upon people's lives and, in doing so, reorientate their direction and objectives:



- Four fishermen did exactly what was asked of them
- This calling is profound, resulting in the embrace of a new purpose as they turn toward his way
- They placed their future livelihood into God's hands

Jesus' invitation to the kingdom is both radical and all-embracing as it permeates every aspect of their lives. These cameos are short, enlightening and descriptive passages where Mark presents a model of the gospel which, separately and combined, presents a total message, inviting us to discover what it means to follow Jesus Christ, both then and now. I don't believe it is too much of a stretch to see the progressive structure in Mark as serving to give the Christian community a greater insight into our larger mission.

- There is a movement from the Jewish synagogue – Mark 1:21-28
- This movement progresses through the Christian home – Mark 1:29-34
- This opens out on a wider community – 1:40-45; 2:1-12; 2:13-17

Don English reminds us in his commentary "That the healing of the demon-possessed man in the synagogue bears all the marks of an original reminiscence, told without embellishment or improvement because this is how it happened."

Unusually for Mark, we are given a place name as the context – that is Capernaum. This unlikely setting becomes the centre of operations for Jesus' ministry in the Galilee. The time is also important, for we are told it is "the Sabbath". We as a congregation meet in a clearly defined context – that is the city centre – and our Sunday evening congregation is where we live out our life of discipleship in both worship and service. What Jesus did in that synagogue is the focus of our attention as we begin a new year together and as we offer leaders to God in prayer.

The priorities that we shall establish will become the mission mandate by which we live out the vision to which God has called us.

Though we are not given any insight at this juncture into what it was that Jesus taught, Mark makes a point of drawing a contrast (v.22) to the religious leaders and this to me would infer that he was not teaching in any way about rules and regulations, but about the lives of his listeners being aligned to God's kingdom. Mark does not give us much actual teaching throughout his gospel when compared to the other writers, but he does use the verb "to teach" sixteen times and the summary in Mark 1:15 is the kernel of his message:

"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (1:15)

What then does this passage have to say to us, particularly in relation to offering leadership through our Praise, Prayer and Preaching congregation?

I offer to you three points of contact which help to inform how we see ourselves and our mission in the world.

WE STAND IN THE MIDST OF PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCE, WITHOUT JUDGEMENT

When Jesus arrives at the synagogue he finds a man who certainly would be considered 'impure'. Here is a person who breaks free of all the parameters of assumed sanctity:

- He cries out and breaks the pattern of religious decorum



- He displays a sickness and malady, which was both outside of his control and the cause of much fear
- He acts in a way that could easily draw severe judgement

The man is possessed by an unclean spirit (v.23). The biblical language would indicate that, put simply, this was contrary to the sacred. Jesus' teaching appears to liberate people who found themselves hemmed in by an understanding of religion that placed them in bonds. The healing ministry of Jesus is central and deeply embedded in our whole understanding of him and, therefore, closely related to his teaching.

The fact that Jesus Christ cast no judgement upon people is a most helpful insight into the way he not only met and engaged with people, but also brought acceptance and peace.

When we consider the challenge of what it means to be a city centre congregation we are not simply different by location, but by the very nature of the human experience which constitutes our life together.

- People looking for a new kind of encounter with church
- People who struggle with their experience of life and often shaped by poor encounters with church
- People whose journey has been marred by hurt and damage of many different kinds

We, like Jesus, stand with people to offer purpose and opportunity. Ronald J Kernaghan in his study of Mark comments, "Jesus' preaching and teaching were not inspirational in the typical sense of that word. He did not dispense hopeful thoughts. His sermons and teachings were expositions of power. They were confrontational, and when he spoke, something happened."

George Whitefield, the eighteenth century evangelist, had much to say on preaching. We have just celebrated the 300th anniversary of his birth. He was amazingly popular and spoke to thousands of people, frequently in open fields. He had a great influence on John Wesley and led him, under God's guidance, into a ministry of open air preaching.

When Whitefield was asked how he knew if he had preached a good sermon, he replied that it was easy, either someone got saved or someone got angry. That could well be a fair description of what happened when Jesus offered his good news.

I had a member of a previous congregation, indeed a leading member, who regularly used to say to me that he wanted to hear more sermons on the theme of judgement. This seemed to be a theme of great attraction, but it was also true that he was a person all too ready to pass judgement on others. In our conversation one day, I reminded him of the three rules when speaking of others – Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?

As it turned out, this same man found himself in a very difficult situation, with regard to his family life. By spending time with him and encouraging others to stand with this person in his experience, without judgement, I was able to see the kind of change in him which only God can bring. It was Samuel Chadwick who said, "I hate to think the worst of others when I might think the best."

WE STAND IN THE MIDST OF PEOPLE'S PAIN, AS WE WORK TOWARD HEALING

Both in this passage and in the later section (1:40-45), Jesus demonstrates healing in different ways, but all to the same purpose of bringing wholeness into people's lives.



CEB Cranfield, in one of his studies, reminds his readers that the New Testament, by contrast with contemporary Jewish and non-Jewish material at the time, shows little interest in demons, except in relation to exorcisms.

This should draw us to a healthy position in understanding such instances, for it is the outcome that matters and even the most distant people, disturbed folk, and those damaged in ways that are hard for us to understand, can find peace and healing.

We cannot avoid the fact that Jesus deals with such a situation with great authority. His words and his deeds aroused wonder amongst those who both heard and observed him.

There are some themes that are best avoided at a dinner party – especially if you are enjoying it and might be looking to meet again. Talking about faith-healing is one such theme. In part, the reason for this is the pictures of such healing practitioners which are best described by strong words such as “charlatan, fraud, huckster”, and so on.

It is interesting that the way Jesus dealt with such matters is so different from some of those pictures to which I refer – and whenever we see Jesus at work bringing healing into people’s lives, what matters most is the outcome and not the drama that people focus upon far too often.

The man with an unclean spirit, more than anyone else in the room, recognises who Jesus is. Yet he is on the margins of society – and you might say the margins of sanity. It takes the disciples eight chapters of experience in Mark’s narrative to arrive at an understanding, but this man appears to be there already! To this point, Mark hasn’t told us anything about what Jesus taught, but shows us that he has power over all things, including that which people label as unclean.

Mark describes the teaching of Jesus in the synagogue as resulting in astonishment on the part of those present (v.22). We would put all the emphasis on the astonishment being about something dramatic that he did, whereas it is his word which causes the greatest consternation.

WE STAND IN THE MIDST OF PEOPLE’S DESPAIR, OFFERING HOPE

The astonishment that I have referred to would be something that would be repeated frequently throughout Jesus’ ministry. This truth in itself can lead us to the temptation to conjure up a scene that is reminiscent of a Hollywood movie. However, the arrival of this tortured man offers a profound teaching moment for Jesus - and later by Mark.

One writer suggests that this encounter drips with irony as Jesus, a man possessed by the Spirit of God (1:10) faces off with a man possessed by the exact opposite.

I consider what is happening in this encounter echoes the truth of Isaiah 58:6:

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?”

Hope stands at the heart of all our ministry and concern for others and we demonstrate that hope as we stand with people. The incident takes place in Capernaum, not Jerusalem, and what we are presented with is an unnamed man suffering from disease; facing a situation which requires help. As Howard Clark Kee observes, “Neither medicine nor magic is the cure.” The healing comes in the form of the presence and words of Jesus Christ.



The position of this account in the ministry of Jesus is highly significant for it is not just new information that Jesus brings but a total transformation of people's lives.

The need for hope is writ deep into our everyday experience. We are often cynical and suspicious. I recall being called from my office in a past appointment to be told that there were some Romany people who wanted to talk to me. My first thought was – Are they looking for money? I was chastised by what followed. As I arrived at their van parked in the car park, I was introduced to a woman who had only recently given birth to a child without any of the assistance of the medical provision that was freely available.

The words the man used were along the lines of "I'm sorry to take up your time, but I want a blessing on our daughter." This was a rather un-Methodist situation. I was not in the business of offering blessings upon new-born babies in the back of vans.

On a similar occasion when I was a chaplain in the field of sport, I was asked to speak with one of the team who had recently arrived from a European country. His concern was that his new baby needed to be baptised. I was clear in my own mind that what he said to me next was a serious mistaken idea. He said, "If the baby isn't baptised, he will go to hell!" I was able to put him in contact with the appropriate Christian tradition to which he belonged, but only after disarming him of some of his mistaken ideas about God and the way he operates in this world.

Similarly, in our Mission, we have to offer hope in situations which are beyond our expectations and sometimes we are able to offer hope by removing some of the disturbing misapprehensions about the nature of God.

As we begin a new year, let us recommit ourselves to stand where Jesus does – in the midst of people's experience, without judgement – in the midst of people's pain, working towards healing – in the midst of people's despair, offering hope.