

POSSESSED

So we've got four writers of gospels...

There's Matthew, Luke, John - and Mark, who was the first of all, and whose gospel we will be looking at most often this year.

Now these guys obviously had to be selective.

They couldn't record everything that Jesus said.

They couldn't include every incident that happened to Jesus.

And they weren't too worried about the exact order of events.

So it's interesting what they each choose to record as the first real public action of Jesus.

For Matthew, it's a collection of teachings given to great crowds of people in the open air: the Sermon on the Mount.

For Luke, it's inside at a public gathering at worship - it's a sermon Jesus preaches in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, and in that sermon we hear Jesus spell out his manifesto of Good News to the poor.

For John, it's a miracle that takes place during a social occasion. Jesus and his family are attending a wedding in Cana.

Embarrassingly for the host, whose job it is to feed and water his guests, the wine is running out. Jesus performs a miracle here turning water into wine, and of course this is more than just a helpful act.

This is a kind of symbolic miracle.

The message is that what Jesus is offering - what Jesus has come to bring - is gonna be better and greater than what has gone before.

So that's Matthew, Luke and John.

That's what they record as the first real public action of Jesus.

But what about Mark's gospel?

What he does, is he chooses an exorcism!

That's what he chooses to start with!

In the reading for today at the start of Jesus' ministry Jesus is confronted by a man who is possessed by an unclean spirit. And Jesus then has the job of ordering the spirit to come out of the man.

What's that about then?

It goes without saying that most people today will have a wee bit of trouble hearing this story.

Casting out an evil spirit seems a foreign notion to our ears.

We could begin by remembering that this is taking place in a world very different to our own - where beliefs were less sophisticated.

This was a primitive age when people believed in a flat earth, that there was an underworld below ground level and that heaven was somewhere up in the sky.

This was a time when the people of Israel reckoned that Spain was the furthest west you could travel without falling off the planet. That's why in the fable of Jonah that we heard last week, when Jonah wanted to disobey God's call for him to go east he got on a boat for Tarshish in Spain. It wasn't so much because he fancied the Costa Del Sol. He reckoned that was as far west as he *could* go.

And this was a time when people believed that evil spirits were in the air and in the water, looking to find a way to possess unsuspecting human beings.

The man who is described as having an unclean spirit or an evil spirit may well have been suffering from some form of epilepsy or mental illness – there were a lot of gaps in medical knowledge in Jesus' time!

I'm sure that much of what was described throughout history as "evil spirits" is probably a misuse of the term.

However, on the other hand, I'm not sure that every situation can be understood and described medically and scientifically. There is more to this world than we know, and the reality and the power of evil are real enough.

More about this later.

The background to this incident maybe helps us realise why Mark is beginning Jesus' public ministry with this moment.

Just as the other writers have thought carefully about the placing of their opening stories, Mark has a reason for including this one here.

Jesus has just been baptised. He has been filled with God's Spirit.

And then he has gone out into the desert, where he has been tempted and had to wrestle with who he is going to be and what his work is going to be about.

Thanks to his awareness of the Spirit of God within him he is able to live his life to the full.

But *this* man, who suddenly appears in the synagogue to confront Jesus, is not like this. He is the opposite.

This man's spirit is in contrast to Jesus' spirit.

He is taken over and prevented from knowing fullness of life.

Jesus has just received affirmation from God. But this man hasn't got the kind of spirit that's going to affirm him or make him realise he is loved by God.

Whatever it is that is wrong with the man, he is certainly not able to live life to the full.

Jesus has the power to set him free. This is a big part of the message of the gospel.

Mark's point is that while there is much in life that can hold us back from living well, and being the people we should be, God is willing to tackle whatever it is that is destroying or hampering our lives.

So Jesus responds to the situation by healing this man and restoring him to health.

I suppose there can be a tendency for some of us to think of the healings of Jesus as if it's Jesus trying to show off and win over the crowds.

But Jesus' healings weren't done for the "awe" and "astonishment" effect. They were really signs of God at work.

Healing is a sign of things being put right.

Restoring our health can be to restore our relationships at all levels. Healing affects our relationship with God, with ourselves, with others in our community.

In Christ's time society reckoned that sick people were generally under the judgement of God.

That's why Jesus forgives the sins of the sick man.

In Christ's time people who were sick were usually avoided, they couldn't work and therefore were poor.

Healing restored them to relationships with others and to useful life in their community.

That's why the lepers Jesus healed had to show themselves to the priest – he could now declare that they were clean and able to go back to ordinary life.

Jesus is healing not just illness, but addictions, and broken relationships and challenging labels and stigma.

He is restoring people to a right relationship.

Its what we might call today wholeness or wellness.

That's what our project Finn's Place is all about – wellbeing.

A modern word, yet Jesus knew more about this than anyone else.

Lets go back for a second to the description of this man as being possessed by an unclean or evil spirit.

We might struggle with this description and not feel too comfortable with the language of "*spirits*" and "*possession*" but can I suggest that maybe its not so far away from our experience?

Haven't we sometimes been so overtaken with anger or jealousy that we've spoken out of turn or acted in a way that we know full well would not be what God would want from us?

Haven't we ever acted out of pure greed or selfishness?

Haven't we ever been consumed with a spirit of revenge – to get our own back on someone who has wronged us?

Haven't we ever behaved out of character because of what was going on in our heads or through the circumstances we found ourselves in?

And there's worse.

Isn't it the case that our addictions are a kind of possession that we are gripped by and unable to break free from?

These addictions have a power over us that stop us from being our better selves - that stop us from being the people we should be.

Our addictions can take many forms:

alcohol,
smoking,
gambling,
pornography,
the internet in general, and social media,
shopping,
negativity,
or needing the approval of others.

Our addictions don't need to be based on external "things". They can be our behavioural patterns.

Or could it be we suffer from the slightly more 'accepted' addictive traits of our time such as,
workaholism,
affluenza, (another word for materialism),
or just plain greed?

Ask yourself this question. *"What might you need to be set free from?"*

Not many of us could honestly reply, *"Nothing!"* to that question!

Jesus has come to set us free from the things that possess us, that hold on to us – and that hold us back.

You might want to ask,

*"How can Jesus help **us**?"*

Aren't we living in the wrong time to expect Jesus' help?

Aren't we just a wee bit late..."

The good news is that Jesus can still help us because the power he used is God's power, and God's power is still at work in our world.

What Jesus did in his earthly ministry was to demonstrate what God was like – (and what God **is** like), because God's care and love does not change.

What Jesus shows us about God stands as true for all time.

God wants us to live our lives to the full and God wants to break down the things that stop us from doing that, and remove the obstacles on our path.

Let me close with this surprising thought....

I can't imagine that when this story was read today many of us identified ourselves with the man with the evil spirit. We naturally want to distance ourselves from someone like him.

But believe it or not, maybe we need to do the opposite.

Maybe we need to realise that just as that man was healed by coming up to confront Jesus with who he was, the shadow side of our own lives can be healed when we refuse to hide away and when we bring our real selves (our true selves) to Christ for him to deal with.

It will take courage and honesty on our part but God cares about us too much to ignore us, and God wants to help us on the road of discovering freedom from the stuff that holds us back.

Will our experience be as dramatic as the story today?

Sometimes it **will** be.

Ask around and you will find stories of people who have had dramatic and sudden encounters with God's grace and mercy.

But sometimes it's not.

"Sometimes the road to healing and restoration takes both time and company. Sometimes it's not about one single (encounter) but the steady work of a grief support network, or an AA group in the church, or a prayer chain, or parenting group, or notices about anger-management classes, or whatever. God is at work in all these ways and so many more to free us from the unclean spirits that still possess us."

(David Lose: Possessed, Working Preacher, January 22, 2015)

God was able to take that conflicted man and set him back on his feet again – changed, healed, restored, whole.

And God has the power to support us as we begin to break free from the things that prevent us living the life we are meant to live.

May we find that to be true for ourselves.

Thanks be to God.

Mark 1:21-28

1 February 2015