

A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas J. Brown, on the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, 29 January 2012. To God be the glory.

In his book entitled *The Bible Speaks to You*, Professor Robert McAfee Brown makes a case for healthy discipleship by saying, “Every three years all people should forget whatever they have learned about Jesus and begin the study all over again” (p. 87). Participating in such an exercise, Brown says, would force us to set Jesus free from the distortions and limitations with which our minds inevitably clothe him, and we would be amazed at what is revealed.

Today’s reading, I think, is a good example of why we might follow Brown’s advice. How can we make sense of demon possession...it’s beyond the experience and imagination of most of us, yet St. Mark gives us this story of Jesus, right up front, as his first story about Jesus.

How do we make sense of it, and how might we apply it to our lives?

Let’s go back to Capernaum, back to this reading. “...and immediately on the Sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and taught...as one who had authority.” What was it, do you suppose, that people sensed about Jesus’s presence? What’s the teaching that so astonished Jesus’s hearers?

We don’t know. Not a word of his teaching is remembered here, nor is it written down. This is somewhat typical of St. Mark, for he never gives us the sermon on the mount, nor does he tell parables in the way that St. Luke did, and he certainly doesn’t have anything of St. John’s poetic imagination. St. Mark is really more like a reporter who has a word limit. What we know of today’s installment is that Jesus taught with a different kind of authority from the scribes.

We listen in on it some more, and we’re interrupted by a crazy person. Right in the middle of the sermon a wild voice disrupts things. They must have had a B-team for ushers that Saturday because the man keeps shouting. Meanwhile the psychiatrists shake their heads. Multiple-personality disorder, or schizophrenia, they say. The preacher descends the pulpit, forgetting about the manuscript on the desk, and says, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, crying with a loud voice, came out of the man.

In Mark’s gospel it does seem to be this way--demons are the ones who often know Jesus. The ones we’d call crazy called Jesus the Holy One. The others, whom we would consider sane, well, they put Jesus to death. And at the end of that scene at Calgary, it was an outsider, a centurion soldier, who proclaimed, “truly this was the Son of God!”

It was Jesus himself...that was the authority that was so unique. And it came through not only in his speaking, but in his being still too.

Maybe the demon-possessed man, along with Jesus's authority, have something more to say. This is why Professor Brown's advice is so apt. Instead of saying what we've been taught for most of our lives, that, "demons are a thing of first century Palestine, not 21st century New England," maybe, instead, we can find ourselves in that synagogue.

I've been possessed by demons. Anger at a colleague or a family member, terrible road rage at other drivers even when the root problem is my tardiness, rather than their driving. Jealousy and envy have possessed me, wanting more money, or thinking I deserve more recognition. You can relate, I'm sure, and I know that none of us has the same struggle. Some of us have felt possessed by addiction--to alcohol, gambling, sex and pornography. Or to other things for which there aren't 12 step programs---to greed, affluence, consistent dishonesty, and working too much.

Sometimes we're healed instantly, like the man at the synagogue in Capernaum. Which is why it's so essential for us to avoid reducing what we do here on Sunday mornings--at these healing stations--as a little blessing to get you through the week. There are moments of dramatic healing and restoration which happen here week in and week out. Yet it's also true that it's not always like that. Sometimes the road to grace and mercy takes enormous amounts of time and company.

Jesus's authority cannot be distilled into one thing...any more than our lives can be. We have to pay attention to his whole life, and to our own as well. We're better off, I think, listening to his words, and being at peace in his silence. Perhaps then we will stand with the outsider at the foot of the cross and confess, "Truly this is the Son of God." In this Beloved One, I will put all my trust."

We march onward through this season after the Epiphany, when light and knowledge are revealed, and as we move, we can resist the temptation to follow the path we've always traveled, and to look for another one. The words of Jesus, even the ones printed in red in our Bibles, are not once and for all; they're new every morning. Commit yourself, and hold me to do likewise, to learn something new about the person and work of Jesus, and to share what we've learned so that we can set free not only ourselves, but also Jesus himself, whose authority and wide-embracing wisdom has yet more love to share.

