

Homily on Mark 1,21-28

January 28, 2018

Intro: Immediately after his call of his first four apostles, Jesus comes to Capernaum, the largest town on the Sea of Galilee. Today's exorcism is the first of the miracles in Capernaum, and it concludes one great day in the evening, when Jesus exorcises and heals the sickness of all who came to his door.

It is fitting that the first miracle in Mark's gospel is the exorcism of an evil spirit. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus went out into the desert for combat with the devil. His whole career will be a conflict with Satan, who holds power in the ancient world. Everyone in Jesus' world believed in demons, and we would be wise to do so today: Richard Rohrbach in 1975 was an agnostic professor of the Bible at Lewis and Clark College in Portland. He brought into his class a petite young woman and asked her to let her demon speak. To the class's astonishment, a booming bass voice thundered out of her, the voice of her demon, speaking in sulfurous language. There are today demons which possess us. The church still does exorcisms even in this 21st century.

Mark: In the ancient synagogue service anyone might be invited to give a teaching about the readings. Jesus' teaching was different; he did not rely on the traditions of the teachers who had gone before him, as did the scribes. He spoke of what the Bible meant, as he had experienced it in his 25 years of attending the synagogue and in his prayer. This astonished the people.

In the congregation was a man possessed by an evil spirit. Although he is only one demon, he speaks for the kingdom of demons when he says, "What have you to do with us?" The demons know that Jesus is the messiah, the Holy One of God. But Jesus does not want testimony from him at this time, and tells him, "Shut up, and come out of him." To manifest his struggle for power, the demon convulses the man with spasms before he comes out of him. This power over demons proves the authenticity of Jesus' teaching, and is seen as part of his teaching, and so their astonishment is turned into praise, and his fame spreads throughout all of Galilee.

The Meaning for us:

First, contemporary Americans do not believe much in demons. Our Latinos and those of other immigrants cultures do. I do, although I have never seen a possessed person. I believe that some people, like Hitler, have a capacity for evil which is beyond the merely human.

Secondly, I think that there are other demonic forces in our world from which we need exorcism by Jesus. These are some cultural forces which seem to me to have demonic power:

Pleasure: Our culture identifies happiness with pleasure, especially sensual pleasure. "If it feels good, do it." This is manifested strikingly in the ways in which we have unhooked sexual pleasure from responsibility. Sexual intercourse is no longer a signal of eternal commitment to a partner, but is simply the pleasure which I need or demand. There are other ways in which pleasure dominates our culture, such as the jet set's ceaseless pursuit of pleasure in new experiences all over the world, or our pursuit of pleasure through drugs. The search for pleasure is powerful, and can dominate us. Perhaps each of you can examine what pleasures have power over your lives.

Wealth: Our culture evaluates persons by how much money they have. We are tormented by dreams of having a lot of money. We make sacrifices of our own best interests in search of jobs which are destroying us and our families, but provide more money. Consumerism is a part of this demonic power: A bumper sticker reads, "The one who dies with the most toys wins."

We turn the birth of our Savior in poverty into an orgy of getting which our consumerist culture needs to

keep the economy going. Advertising not only leads us to things that we need, but entices us to chase after things we do not need. We all have experienced the power of demon consumerism.

Power: We know people who are power mad; they want absolute control over others. In fact, we have fairly obvious examples of this in American politics. For most of us, this demon is better described as *control*. At a minimum we are expected to secure our lives and those of our family. Our culture so expects us to overcome accidents of the weather, of the economy, of others' greed, that if we experience reversals, it is our fault. This demon leads to depression.

Secularism: The ultimate demonic force is the denial of God. We have made humans into god. An American poem says, "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul." Nonsense! We cannot control the weather, we cannot control economic reversals brought on by the greed of bankers; we cannot control even our relationship with our spouses. The only real control we have is aligning our desires and actions with God's holy will. Then we experience the only real pleasure, the only real wealth, the only real power there is.

These demonic forces of our culture affect us, they imprison us, they dehumanize us, they even demonize us. We need exorcism by Jesus just as much as does the possessed man in today's gospel. I invite you this year to read the gospel of Mark as the way in which Jesus liberates people from these demons. If you do so, then this will be the year of liberating grace for you.

Good news!