



THE NEW SHOFAR

It is in Jesus alone we find our freedom

Job 7:1-7 - Mark 1:29-39

5th Ordinary Sunday

February 4th

they brought to him those possessed ... cast out many demons

In this opening chapter of his Gospel it is as if Mark was saying: *watch this space* and then one after the other there are signs, healings and exorcisms all pointing to a whole new world. There he finds Peter's mother-in-law lying down with a fever. The point of having her lying down is to stress that she was not standing up and serving. Something is hindering her in this – an illness. While they were standing there speaking, Jesus went over to the sick woman, took her hand and healed her. The specific Greek grammar used here (historical presence) is used to highlight her plight, that while they were standing around

What are some of the evils we experience as humans in human communities the Son of God came to destroy? From which we have been set free? If today's miracle story is to be believed, why is it, if Christ was victorious over Satan and all evil spirits, evil continues in our world? What is our role (as faith communities and individual believers) in bringing Christ's victory alive today? How do we do it? Be realistic and practical.

chatting, there she was, lying down with a fever raging through her body. Earlier he had controlled the demon by word of his command. This time, he heals by the power of his touch. This is a much more intimate form of healing. He goes up to her and without discussing issues like contamination and the fear of being rendered ritually unclean, shows his compassion and raises her up from the bed, back into health again. What does she do? She climbs to her feet and *began serving them*. This is the mission of Jesus, to turn people from their lives of enslavement to a life of serving (discipleship). He did not need to apply magical incantations, magic, amulets or any other object that was commonly found in pagan healing rites. His word was enough. Mark follows this healing with a summary that was meant to highlight the whole of Jesus ministry.

We are only on day two of his ministry and already *people were bringing to him all those who were sick or demonized*. Something was happening. It is impossible for God's Messiah to take up his mission of inaugurating the Rule of God and the world continue unchanged. It has become apparent, even in these very early days, that nothing can resist the power of God at work in creation. All kinds of sick people, along with those with an array of evil spirits enslaving them, come to Jesus and are freed. Mark is not simply talking about a couple of wonderful events but is offering to his readers an intimate insight into what having a Messiah means: people are set free. Mark is clearly not trying to indicate the Jesus only makes sense to those who are sick or demon possessed. There are many things that burden the lives of men and women. Some of these are a result of our own sins and failings while others are brought into our lives through no fault of our own. No human being is so removed from the consequences of sin that they do not need healing and freeing. This is the lot of all of us and it continues throughout life. Some of these limitations are brief while others are with us until we die. The point Mark stresses is that with our human limitations we need more in our lives than those things we can build up on our own and achieve through our own efforts and skills. What we need is what God

What freedoms do people need? What are some of the socially acceptable things that limit our freedom? What is the source of these evils? How do we overcome them?

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anathoth.hough@gmail.com - www.houghongod.com

alone can give and God gives us this gift of freedom, healing and salvation in and through Jesus his Son and our Messiah. This gift is not just for ourselves but is in urgent need for all creation, something that is obvious, as a viewing of any evening news will illustrate. It all comes down to a choice. We need intentionally to choose God and it is then that we come into the presence of God through the intimacy of our relationship with the Christ who reaches out to us and takes our hand. Having experienced this freeing up, we are then called upon to serve God and to serve other people. As Mark will show throughout the Gospel, the way that we serve God is in our serving of others.

Only in Christ can we rejoice in the fruits of his Victory

Ralph Martin, the president of *Renewal Ministries* wrote how we need to begin any reflection on sin, evil and the Devil with an affirmation of the fact that the death and resurrection of Christ defeated Satan. “Christ conquered Satan. The war has been won; Christ has conquered, though skirmishes will continue until Christ comes to reign forever. the devil is “real, relevant, important but not the central focus,” said Martin.

Discuss: The practical wisdom about safeguarding ourselves against the ‘fiery darts’ of the devil — which fly at us every day in the disordered desires of our own flesh, in the lies of the culture, undoubtedly some of which are demonically inspired, and the personal temptation we are subjected to, which we find in Ephesians 6 — is really essential,” said Martin.

As I pray over today’s Gospel reading and read through some of the theology books in my library, I do have to wonder whether or not we Christians - Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox, all of us have effectively removed Satan and evil spirits from our theology and from our exegesis of the Bible as we focus instead on grace, love and hope? In the light of our New Testament – and in particular Mark’s Gospel – that would be a grave mistake.

According to our scriptures, behind the disobedient choice of our first parents lurks a seductive voice, opposed to God. They are seduced into actions which makes them fall with the sins of envy and disobedience. According to all biblical writings, Scripture and the Church's Tradition this voice is ***amplified by*** a fallen angel,

called *Satan* or *the devil*. This kind of language is picked up and used by every Christian denomination: e.g. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* declares that *the liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers results in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin*. Even when talking about Satan and demons, the focus rightly remains firmly fixed on Christ.

While the Devil and his evil minions may have disappeared from our sermons and from our Bible Studies, it is very much still present in official church documents and most certainly has not been edited out of our Bibles. One of the works of the Son of God was the destruction of the power of Satan. And who (or what) is this Satan? Biblically, Satan names that which is working against God and God's kingdom in this world. Accepting the reality of Satan and evil spirits is not a way of escaping responsibility for evil, for our sins – *Satan made me do it!* – but it does help us understand our weaknesses and the way the world can destroy itself through the same sins of disobedience, envy and pride.

We have to know evil's power of seduction, the manifold ways it seeks to lure us to embrace the darkness. It is only when we can name evil will we be able to acknowledge that evil is not just in others. It is, in fact, something of which each of us is capable. One reality of human history is the horrific list of crimes and evils committed on one another. We really don't need Satan as an explanation for this evil. The prophet Jeremiah had it right: *The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked*: More than that is a search for scapegoats. The Jesus proclaimed to us in today’s Gospel is a Jesus who sets us free from the darkness that so easily enter our lives and into the world. This is a key theme of the whole of Mark’s Gospel – *who is this man that even evil spirits obey him?*

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