



Ordinary Sunday 4

THE NEW SHOFAR

God sets free the people chosen to be his own

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 - Mark 1:21-28

January 28th

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me

It is worthwhile remembering how the Book of Deuteronomy was probably composed over some three centuries, with the compiling of the traditions beginning in the eighth century and its final additions being added after the exile. It reflects in many ways the Book of the Law found in the Jerusalem Temple during the reign of King Josiah (622^{B.C.}) but importantly for today's readers, it was composed under the dark clouds of war, dispossession from the land and the exile into Assyria of the Northern Kingdom (722^{B.C.}). These were dark times when the very future of Judah (the

Northern Kingdom) as a people was threatened. The prophets spoke of God turning his back on a disobedient nation and so Deuteronomy serves as a kind of warning to the people of Israel (the Southern Kingdom) about their covenant responsibilities to obedience and to faithfulness to Yahweh alone. Its message is clear: there is only one God and for the people to regain the blessings lost with the fall of Adam and Eve, they needed to build their lives around a commitment to faithful living

What role do the laws of the Bible play in our lives? How can we tell which laws are culturally limited and which laws are eternal? Are sin and law related? What did Jesus mean when he said he had not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it? Give some examples.

This explains why today's reading is so helpful and instructive.

The Jewish people, at the time of Jesus were yearning for this *prophet like me* to come among them. There had been no *prophet in the land* and the people wondered whether or not they too had been abandoned by God. This prophet would be sent by God to inaugurate a new time, a new covenant, a time when God's will did not need to be written on stone tablets for it would be cherished in the hearts of all believers and their commitment to God illustrated by the way they lived in the world

'What is this? A new teaching—with authority!'

It is not difficult for us to understand what Mark is doing here in the opening verses of his Gospel. He is setting the stage for presenting to readers an account of the messianic activities of Jesus. John the Baptist has been introduced and presented as the prophet spoken of by Isaiah. He is the one whose role it was to announce the arrival of the Messiah of God, the One who was the fulfilling of the promise of God that a *prophet like me* would be sent to Israel to inaugurate a new age of faithfulness.

We have watched as Jesus launches into his public ministry, preaching the good news of God's Rule and the calling his first disciples. Now we see the first of the exorcisms and healings that will be offered as proof of the authority behind his ministry. These are much more than just miracles. They are solemn and unambiguous declarations of a transformed world, a new creation in which God, men and women are once more united together in an intimate relationship of love, trust and fidelity. For those who believe a new world is possible but it only becomes a reality in and through Jesus Christ the Son of God.

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In Jesus something new is happening in our world

Amazingly, a man possessed by a defiling spirit suddenly appeared in the midst of the service. Those hearing this account would have been stunned at the thought of an unclean spirit being at home in a house of God. All of those righteous people and they did not discern the presence of an *evil spirit* in their midst? What was wrong with their religion that this could happen?

What we have here is one of Mark's key themes, a powerful message to his own Church and to believers of all time. It is set in a conflict situation, wherein Jesus goes head to head with one of Satan's minions. The clash takes place in God's house – the local synagogue. It would have been reasonable to think that this would be one of the last places in which the Devil and his hordes would seek victims to oppress but that is exactly what is happening here. It would seem that the faith life and spiritual life of the community was such that this demon did not feel threatened. As a result, this poor man was crushed and taken over by this unclean spirit. He had nowhere to go and if he could not find freedom in the village house of prayer, where was he to find freedom? This is what happens when the religious and spiritual lives of believers and believing communities become stale: they no longer bring light to those in darkness. Without heavenly Light within the community, darkness begins to creep in and they do not even notice!

The Devil and evil spirits are very much a part of our Bible traditions, yet some would like to insist they do not exist. Can we ignore the existence of the Devil? How should we understand evil in the world? Does the Devil have any place in our understanding of creation, salvation, temptation, good and evil? I believe evil spirits exist but what does today's Gospel tell me about them? How do I deal with them?

That is the way Mark has presented it to us. It is into this environment that Jesus the Son of God comes. He prays and sings with the congregation and then offers some preaching and teaching. Now, listening to what he is saying, they are changed. They understand that in Jesus, all things have an opportunity to be transformed. Note that Jesus is not changing the standard order of service. What he does is bring what already existed into a new state of life. The people were amazed at what their scripture readings and reflections could offer them – when they are read in the light of Jesus and his message. It is when their religious activities and spiritual works are done in the *living Christ* that what God is doing and saying is opened up for them. Dry habitual performances blind us to the God within.

Having set up that background, Jesus now confronts the symbol of darkness, fear, suffering, loneliness, sickness and all of the things that stop us from experiencing freedom. This demon did what few others in the Gospel are able to do. It proclaimed Jesus as the *Holy One of God*, the long awaited Messiah, the Son of God, the promised *prophet like me* and so a major threat to the rule of Satan. The scene for conflict is set up but what a disappointment. There is no fight. There is no resistance from the demon. Jesus commands him to *Shut up!* and to *leave this man and go!* That is exactly what happened. What Mark tells us is that freedom, new perspectives on life; new insights into how we are to be living and how we go about finding the grace and power of God at work in our lives are now open to us in Jesus. All that we do in life, whether it is our life in the Church, in our families, at work, play, or whatever it is that is happening in the world, can bring us peace and contentment when we tackle these things in Christ. The power of Jesus is an absolute power. What Mark is telling us is: *Use it!*