

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.
Amen.

This Sunday's Gospel has intriguing lessons for us as individuals and as a people called to be in community. Last week we saw Jesus inviting his first disciples to follow him; Peter, Andrew, James and John were mentioned by name, but there were others gathering around Jesus as he began his ministry there in Galilee. As Jesus makes his way through the towns and villages along the Sea of Galilee, his teaching becomes more well-known. One commentator calls Jesus at this stage of his ministry "a local celebrity"; not known beyond this region but becoming famous within it. A sign of that "local celebrity" is when Jesus gets to the synagogue at Capernaum, where we meet him in our Gospel lesson this morning. In order to teach in the synagogue, the leaders of that synagogue would have had to invite Jesus to do so; no rabbi simply imposed himself on a congregation. So Jesus is well-known enough to be *invited* to teach; but the congregation will soon find out that Jesus' presence brings more than just new ways of seeing the Hebrew scripture. Jesus' presence is provocative; demons that may have

otherwise remained silent or unobserved suddenly speak and are revealed for all to see.

This man with the unclean spirit has no outward indications of his possession recorded by our Gospel writer. Unlike the Gerasene demoniac, this man is not bruising himself on rocks, or so frightening that the town keeps him in chains. No, this man is simply in the synagogue with the rest of the congregation. I wonder if they even knew he had this unclean spirit; if so, this congregation in Capernaum is to be commended for welcoming this man into the one place he might find healing. But, I think that perhaps they didn't recognise this man as being possessed by his demon; I think that maybe his demon was subtle, and didn't make itself known in spectacular ways. That's the way it usually is with the demons who possess us; any harmful way of thinking or being that controls our behaviour can be thought of as an unclean spirit.

Our unclean spirit may be fear; fear of not having what we want, fear of the unknown, fear of the "other"; our unclean spirit may be our desire to feel in control; in control of people around us, in control of our life circumstances; our unclean spirit may be contempt of those we see as separate from us, it

may be a desire for power, it may be greed; it may be hatred. These unclean spirits may control our behaviour in many ways, but usually they seem normal, less than spectacular. By being quiet, or even common, our demons can become unnoticeable; and we learn to get along with them, even if deep down some part of our soul knows that unclean spirit is destroying us.

But this man found himself unexpectedly blessed and disturbed; because this morning in the synagogue in Capernaum, the congregation welcomed and made space for the *living* Word of God. No book or scroll or parchment in their midst would have had this effect. Jesus comes in and teaches God's word in a way that transcends everything they've read or heard before; and the presence of this living Word confronts this man's demon and forces it out of its silence.

Jesus' presence is provocative; in this synagogue in Capernaum, and in our lives right now, inviting Jesus to speak to us - deeply and intimately with teaching that challenges and changes - will rouse our demons whether we've known about them or not. In the face of Jesus, our contempt can no longer hide; nor can our fear, or our hatred. They will be fully revealed,

brought to the surface of our lives and we will be forced to confront them. That is why, like this demon, many of us in many different ways choose to say to Jesus, “What have you to do with us? If we let you in, Jesus, you will tear apart everything we’ve put together to justify ourselves, to soothe our conscience when it is uneasy, to make ourselves look good enough in our own eyes that we have an excuse not to change.”

Jesus’ teaching is a radical departure from what this congregation was used to. Jesus demands of them, and of us, more than just piety, or niceness; Jesus won’t let us get along by simply having our demons behave in civilised ways and throw in a random act of kindness now and again. Jesus doesn’t let us remain comfortable with our unclean spirits. Jesus’ presence is meant to turn us inside out; to bring out into the open all of our quiet, unassuming demons and force them to speak plainly about what they are, and for us to be confronted by what they are doing in our lives. And here is the Good News: Jesus’ presence has authority. Jesus is able, if we hold the space for him to see and name our demons, Jesus is able to utterly defeat and undo the power they have in our lives. That means our behaviour is no longer controlled by fear, or greed, or the desire

for power; and with those demons gone, Jesus, the living Word of God, that brings us life and freedom can be present in their place.

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

The congregation in Capernaum, gathered in the name of God, found Jesus among them. This man and his demons were there, too, the best place they could possibly be. The congregation and Jesus held this space that allowed this man to receive the deepest healing possible; and in confronting his demons, the man made space for Jesus to free him.

In our communities we are called to invite Jesus and his radical teaching and power to heal to be in the midst of us; as individuals, we are called in the presence of Jesus to a radical honesty that speaks of our demons and exposes them to Jesus' light. By this, day by day, we learn; day by day we are made whole; and day by day we can embody the living Word that cleanses our hearts and our conscience. Like the congregation at Capernaum, we are challenged to enlarge the space in which those burdened by unclean spirits can find new life. And by inviting Jesus into our midst and into our lives, we can become truly free. Amen.