
Sunday 31st January – Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

Readings: Revelation 12:1-5a & Mark 1:21-28

Revelation 12:1-5a

The woman and the dragon

A great sign appeared in heaven : a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who 'will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre.' And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.

Mark 1:21-28

Jesus drives out an impure spirit

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, 'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!'

'Be quiet!' said Jesus sternly. 'Come out of him!' The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, 'What is this? A new teaching – and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.' News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

Reflection

Wow!

The Lectionary passage from the book of Revelation is strange, even bizarre! The Apostle John 'sees' what he calls two significant events:

The first was a pregnant woman about to give birth. She was clothed with the sun, standing on the moon and crowned with twelve stars.

The second was a large red dragon, with seven heads, ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. He stood in front of the woman ready to devour the baby as soon as it was born.

The woman gave birth to a son, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. Immediately, the child was snatched away from the dragon and safely taken to God.

Over the years, passages like this one from Revelation have 'inspired' many preachers to offer weird and wonderful interpretations as to their meaning. However, most commentators agree on the meaning of these verses – the woman is Israel, the dragon is the devil and the child is Jesus. *If you want to know more, ask Adam!*

The Mark passage could also be considered 'unusual' as it deals with Jesus driving out "evil spirits".

Some Christians struggle with the idea that demonic power is a reality in 2021. Talk of spirits and demons seems primitive and makes us uncomfortable today. We prefer to speak of mental illness as the causes of much bizarre behaviour.

We also hesitate to use the word evil, which sounds judgmental, and look to medical science to deliver us from our demons. However, medical science is unlikely ever to solve the problem of evil, which is a spiritual problem and a present reality. We have only to read a newspaper to confirm the pervasive presence of evil in our world.

The idea of exorcism (driving out demons or evil spirits) can make us even more uncomfortable. However, there are many examples of exorcism in the New Testament (Matthew 9:32-34; 12:22-32; Mark 1:21-27; 3:14-30; 5:1-20; 6:7; 7:24-30; 9:17-29; 16:17; Acts 5:16; 8:7; 19:12).

Today, some churches still practice exorcism - *we should never hesitate to call on the Holy Spirit to set people free from demonic power!*

For a number of years, as a church leader, I was involved in deliverance ministry, especially with people who had been involved with the occult. In the 1982 I co-authored a book entitled *Cults and the Occult Today*. Because of my experiences of

seeing the effects of demonic power in people's lives I can confirm the reality of evil spirits.

What do the verses in Mark gospel mean for us today?

Jesus taught with real authority unlike the Jewish religious leaders. His teaching was so powerful that it provoked an evil spirit to cry out and acknowledge that he was the Son of God. *"I know who you are – the Holy One of God!"*

Jesus has authority over all demonic power. *"Be quiet!"* Jesus ordered, *"Come out of the man."* The evil spirit screamed, threw the man to the ground and came out of him.

Whatever our views on the reality of evil spirits we can be assured that Jesus has ALL authority over ALL things. He can be trusted to be with us in every situation!

Peter Sanderson