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Mark's Gospel inspires us to draw out evil of every kind

Thomas Gumbleton | Feb. 2, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

Now as we try to listen carefully to today's Scripture lessons, there are a couple of things that we need to put into context. First of all, as I mentioned in introducing the Gospel, this event comes right after Jesus has for the first time proclaimed, "The Reign of God is at hand. Change your lives." Enter into this Reign of God by undergoing an extraordinary, profound kind of upheaval in your life. You've got to overcome what was wrong and now follow the way of Jesus. Change your lives, because then you will enter into the Reign of God.

Right after Jesus does this, He goes on to call His disciples, the first disciples, and He begins now His public life. The first event is going into the synagogue, and the extraordinary thing that happens there on this Sabbath day in that synagogue. The first thing that I think might come to our attention is how excited the people were. "The people were astonished," Mark says, "and they wondered with what authority He preaches. He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey Him. Who is this?"

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalms 95:1-2, 6-7, 7-9

1 Corinthians 7:32-35

Mark 1:21-28

Full text of the readings [1]

If we listen to our first lesson and remember what we heard from the Book of Deuteronomy, I think we will begin to sense the excitement of the people. As we heard in that first lesson, God was proclaiming to Moses -- this is just before Moses is to die -- and God tells him that even though Moses is gone, "I shall raise up a prophet from your midst, one of your brothers, who will be like you" -- that is, like Moses.

"I will put my words into his mouth and he will tell them all that I command." They've been waiting. This is hundreds of years later. The chosen people have been waiting for this new prophet, one like Moses, the greatest prophet in their history. Suddenly they begin to sense that prophet is with us. It's Jesus. They're astonished. They get all excited, and are ready to listen and, we hope, follow Him.

That's the first thing we need to think of as we try to understand the Scriptures: the excitement and why. But then also, in Mark's Gospel especially, we find that Mark identifies evil in the world as coming from demons. They were agents of evil, and in fact, at that time, people thought that not just moral evil, but when something bad or painful happened, demons were behind it. The modern scholars will tell us that many people were regarded as being possessed by demons during Jesus' lifetime today would be classified as severely mentally ill.

Two thousand years ago, evil and demons were almost synonymous. Everything was attributed to that, and so what was really happening here was in driving off this demon, Jesus is overcoming evil in the context in which this happened. The people see the overcoming of evil, the transformation of the world happening through Jesus in the driving out of this demon. Each of the Gospels starts off in a different way. This is the third thing we have to be thinking of as we try to let this Gospel lesson and the lessons of today enter into our lives.

Each of the Gospels starts in a different way, and the way it starts, the way the Gospel writer has put it together, gives us a sense of what will be the main emphasis in the Gospel.

In Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus begins His public life, immediately we have the long Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus begins to act very clearly as a teacher, and lays out His program, His agenda, the values that are going to shape and form the lives of the people who follow Him. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the gentle. Blessed are the suffering. Blessed are the sorrowful. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice. We know that long Sermon on the Mount, and then Matthew's Gospel, is mostly taken up with these long discourses where Jesus teaches.

John's Gospel starts with a miracle, the wedding at Cana, where Jesus changes the water into wine. This is John's way of telling us that the theme of the rest of that Gospel, just as it was significant for Jesus in John's Gospel to replace the water of Judaism with the wine of Christianity. That's the theme, that Jesus is going to fulfill everything that had been begun in Judaism. It won't end because you still need water, but it becomes fulfilled in this miracle. So John's Gospel is about that transforming and replacing the water of Judaism with the wine that Jesus proclaims through his message.

Luke's Gospel starts right off with Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth, proclaiming, "The Reign of God is at hand," but then going on to say, "The Spirit of God is upon Me." That says we need to proclaim good news to the poor and give the blind new sight, set the downtrodden free and proclaim God's year of favor. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is going to be a Jesus who brings about change, especially by reaching out to the poor and to the oppressed. You'll find that happening again and again in Luke's Gospel.

In Mark's Gospel, the very first thing that happens, this miracle, destroying this demon and driving it away, says Jesus is going to show us the way to overcome evil in our world. That will be the theme of Mark's Gospel, that we continue to try to listen to Jesus so that we can overcome evil wherever it comes up in our world. In every way possible, we're going to transform our world into the Reign of God where evil will be overcome, where there will be fullness of life for all people, where all will participate in the joy, peace and the fullness of life that God offers in the Reign of God.

With this background, reflecting on these things, obviously if we're going to listen to Mark's Gospel today, and as we continue to listen to it throughout this year, we have to keep on finding the way that we are going to be those following Jesus as His disciples to overcome evil in our world. That will be the responsibility of the community of disciples of Jesus converted to God's way, and then we become the means by which the power of evil in our world is overcome.

So we are entering into the work of Jesus, of bringing the Reign of God into fullness. Someone said that throughout our lives, if we are not leaving the world a better place, having overcome certain kinds of evil, we will have failed what our calling is. It really is important for each of us to think about the evil in the world around me. How can I overcome that evil? We're most aware of moral evil, of course, but it also means physical evil.

For example, do I really have a sense of compassion and reach out to the sick, those that are afflicted by physical evil and sickness? Do I minister and visit, show kindness to the poor, the neglected, the oppressed? Do I really look upon it as my responsibility to try to overcome evil by working for a just world? There are so many different ways in which each of us can begin to say, "How do I follow this teaching of Jesus that is proclaimed today by the actions of Jesus, especially destroying evil, driving out the demons, the evil?"

Again, there are so many different ways in which we can do this, but especially the moral evil in our world. One of the things that comes to my mind because we're in the midst of this political campaign, and then also there is

a greater awareness, partly because of the political campaign, of the vast difference in our world, in our own country, between so few who have so much and so many who have so little.

When you expand that beyond our country, we live in a world where that distortion is overwhelming, and where it clearly is in opposition to everything that Jesus taught, where everyone should have a right to a full human life. If we're going to begin to change things and carry out our task as disciples of Jesus, then perhaps we could start with simply our own attitude, our own thinking.

I think it can be said without fear of great contradiction that our society is a society that puts a lot of emphasis on individualism. "I will make it on my own. Everyone should make it on his or her own." We glorify that kind of thing. That isn't the way Jesus taught, and it isn't the way the first disciples lived. They shared everything. They had a sense of the common good, where everybody gets a chance to be enhanced and to have development in their lives so they have a full human life.

That common good, that's something that seems to be neglected in our society as people glory in the idea, "I made it on my own." None of us can make it on our own, really. We have to find a way, I think, just to change that attitude so that then we begin to understand that there are reasons why some people are very rich, a few people really, both in our country and in the world, and the majority are engaged in a terrible struggle in our society more and more, and we had the idea that our society was one where everyone could achieve a much better life.

It isn't true anymore, and it isn't true throughout the world. So how do we respond to that? If we're going to drive out this demon, we have to look at how the system works. Again, the political campaign has been bringing this out. We have a tax system where the poor pay a higher percentage of their income in taxes than the richest people do. Obviously, this complex tax system has to be reformed and changed, because it is bringing injustice into our society.

We would go on and spell this out in greater detail, but I simply ask us today to look at this as a kind of demon in our world where the system works so that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Look into this: Why does that happen? and commit ourselves to try to change it. If we're going to be disciples of Jesus, we have to do what He did: Drive out the demon, overcome evil with good. That's the message that Jesus proclaimed today as we begin looking at His public life in the Gospel of Mark.

As we go through this year, we'll find that Sunday after Sunday, Jesus is showing us the way to overcome evil in the world. It's our responsibility, and it hope each of us will take this seriously, to respond to His invitation to join Him in driving out the demons and making the Reign of God happen so that everyone enjoys all the blessings that God has given for all.

[Homily given at St. Leo Church, Detroit, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** [2] to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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