

**Sermon for Sunday 31st January, Revelation 12:1-5a, Mark 1:21-28
by Gertine Blom, Children & Families' Minister, St Mark's**

I can't express how much I love fantasy stories. In my opinion, there is nothing like immersing yourself in a magical world, a fictional universe that, although it doesn't exist, is truly beautiful, with mysterious laws of nature and mythical creatures and a lot of wizards, unicorns and dragons. In a good fantasy story, you need an epic battle between good and evil, a long struggle to overcome the dark forces or to defeat the terrifying monster, in order to live happily ever after.

But, in a lot of fantasy stories, before evil is destroyed forever, it tries to overthrow all that is good. The power of evil can be really strong, deceiving even the best characters.

Take, for example, the Lord of the Rings, the books by J.R.R. Tolkien. In The Lord of the Rings, the good king of Rohan is possessed by an evil wizard. The king can't make his own decisions anymore, is controlled by the whispers of the wizard.

And, another example for the younger generations among us: Harry Potter, also a wonderful tale about the battle between good and evil. In one of the books, Ginny Weasley, a friend of Harry Potter, is possessed by the dark Lord Voldemort. He makes her do terrible things she can't even remember doing.

And then, of course in all fantasy fiction, there is always the inevitable hero that will defeat these malicious forces.

So, in stories, we are pretty familiar with the possibility of evil spirits possessing human beings. But our everyday reality is (unfortunately, I have to say) not governed by magic or supernatural beings. Our world is quite straight forward and a bit boring. No mysterious explanations for strange behaviour. We try to explain things through science and common sense.

This is why the passage we have read in the Gospel of Mark, is quite a tricky one. Because this story is about a so called 'unclean spirit' which is possessing a man in the synagogue Jesus is visiting. It's an exorcism story, a story that seems to belong in the realm of fantasy and not reality.

One of our first impulses might be to skip this story because we don't really understand what is going on. This was certainly my first impulse.

But it is important to notice that this is not 'just a story' in the Gospel of Mark. No, this is Jesus' first sign. Mark has told his readers about Jesus' baptism, the temptation in the wilderness, and the calling of the first disciples, and now Jesus is beginning his public ministry.

Like the wedding in Cana is Jesus' first sign in the gospel of John and sets the scene for the whole of the Gospel, this story about the man with the unclean spirit, is also not a random choice. Mark tells us this story because he wants to make something clear about Jesus.

Let's take a closer look. In this short passage, Mark 1 verse 21-28, Jesus teaches in the synagogue of Capernaum. The people there were amazed by his authority. Apparently, Jesus is different than the spiritual leaders of Israel. There is something about him that strikes people.

But then a man with an unclean spirit disturbs the gathering.

I have thought a lot about unclean spirits in the last week. At first, like a said, this worldview seemed so strange, so distant to ours. What in the world are unclean spirits? Is it epilepsy or mental illness?

But then I watched the news with this story in the back of my mind. Last week, my own country, the Netherlands, saw the most violent riots in decades: looting of shops, young men attacking police and destroying property. This is also a time of weird conspiracy theories based on completely bizarre ideas. And I read about the rich countries of this world making sure they have enough vaccines to vaccinate their people, at the expense of others.

It looks like a lot of different demons are flying around in our modern scientific time.

And no, they don't appear only in the minds of others. I have to be honest. In my life also, invisible forces and voices from inside and outside, are telling me what to do. It reminds me of the words of the apostle Paul in the letter to the Romans: I do not what I want, I do the very thing I hate.

The urge to scroll down my Twitter timeline, leaving me empty and often sad – but I can't stop.

The voice telling me I am only worthy when I am successful.

I wonder how many unclean spirits are present in my life and in your life.

The spirit of insecurity, wanting you to constantly prove yourself. The spirit of addiction, forcing you to take more and more. The spirit of anger preventing you from reconciling with your friend. The spirit of perfectionism, leaving you frustrated because it's never good enough.

There are so many of them.

When Jesus meets this man in the synagogue, it's not a casual encounter between a rabbi and a man with mental illness.

It is a meeting between the powers of good and evil. Between the one who has come to deliver his people, and the forces of darkness trying to overcome him.

The unclean spirit realizes this immediately. This is Jesus the Messiah. It cries out: 'Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!'

The spirit is the only one present giving Jesus a special title. That seems... strange. Why would this spirit, out of all people, recognize Jesus' identity?

If we look back to the beginning of the Bible, we see that the first human, Adam, is given the power to name all the animals. Names are important. The one doing the naming has more authority than the one being named. The unclean spirit wants to have this power over Jesus.

But Jesus says: Be silent!

Jesus doesn't allow the spirit to name him. If anyone is naming other human beings, it's Jesus. He doesn't want our demons defining us. Jesus is the one naming us, calling us his disciples and friends.

And then, Jesus heals the man. The spirit is trying to go out with a fight, but he has to surrender and leaves. The people are once more amazed by Jesus and don't know what to make of it. That will remain the theme of the

Gospel of Mark, the question around the identity of Jesus and the not-knowing, the confusion.

But for us, the readers, this is a story that reveals already a lot about Jesus' ministry. Everything, actually. Jesus has come to liberate, to heal, and to face the powers of destruction. This, Mark tells us, is the beginning of the final defeat of the enemies of God.

And so, this seemingly simple story brings us to a much bigger and all-encompassing reality.

This is reflected in our second reading, Revelation chapter 12. There, we see a similar encounter taking place. The woman carrying the child in her womb, and the dragon trying to kill it.

Good and evil. Light and dark. Liberation and oppression. The climax of everything, the climax of our world. The whole big story of our reality leads us to this: God has the ultimate authority. Not the dragon, not the forces of evil, not our unclean spirits.

The writer Tolkien has said that the reason why we like fantasy stories so much, is because there is truth in them. You can't dismiss them as only fiction and hopeful storytelling. The joyous turn of a story, just at that moment when all seemed hopeless, points us to God's overwhelming grace and joy. It's the very structure of our world. Not just story. History. The ending will be joyful.

Jesus forcing out the unclean spirit, disturbed the leaders of Israel, who felt their authority challenged. It disturbed the spirits, who wanted to be the ones owning human beings. The battle between good and evil is a long one. It has led Jesus to the cross, the place where all the powers of evil tried to destroy him.

But in this cosmic battle, Jesus Christ is the one defeating the dragon. The ending of our story, of all our individual stories, will be joyful, because he is the one going before us. And so, at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry on earth, the scene is set. However powerful the unclean spirits in our lives seem to be, however hopeless this world seems – they don't have the last word. Jesus is our last word.