

Christ's work on earth begins

This is the beginning of the adventure. The Gospel reading we have just heard is the first public act of Jesus' ministry, at the synagogue in Capernaum. Thirty years have passed since Jesus' birth, and he has now arrived at the synagogue, and will be teaching. Why on earth should anybody listen to the son of carpenter from a place with such a lousy reputation as Nazareth? In his book, *The School and College St Mark*, Rev. Marshall tells us that the scribes were not allowed to teach until they had reached the age of thirty years, which is the age that Jesus was.

It is as if he had been waiting for this moment to arrive, and here it was at last, the debut, the premiere, the first innings.

So here we go. St Mark, unfortunately, does not tell us much about what Jesus said that day, except to say that they were amazed at his teaching: for he taught as one who had authority and not like the scribes. Yet the scribes were the establishment scholars, the doctors of the law.

So everything seems to be going just as one might expect: a gifted, young preacher is presenting his opening sermon. I remember preaching my first sermon, too, in Birmingham in Advent 1986. I was speaking about John the Baptist and I'll tell you more about it if you ask... I have no doubt that Jesus remembers his first sermon just as vividly. But then something happened to Jesus which, thankfully, did not happen to me.

A man in the synagogue with an unclean spirit cries out "Leave us alone." Who is crying out? Is it the man or the unclean spirit? Nobody seems quite sure. The Jerusalem Bible has it that the unclean spirit was crying out : the New

International Version has it that it was the man. Either way, we know that there is a desperate struggle going on in this man : like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. The most important thing is that the man and the spirit are there. But the key is that, before Jesus has finished, the spirit living in the man has recognized Jesus for who he is.

Monsignor Robin Knox translates the unclean spirit's words so: "Why dost thou *meddle* with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" as if the man is frightened that Jesus might upset the established order of things. Indeed, he has good reason to be frightened by him.

Some will try to deny the existence of the unclean spirit and talk in vague terms about mental illness, but there is one feature in this story which comes up over and over again in the Gospel narratives about Jesus and it is this: the demons all recognise Jesus as the Son of God.

Let us be quite clear: they all recognise who Jesus is. Saint James writes "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that - and shudder." Simply believing in the existence of one god is not sufficient for eternal life. The key thing is not simply to accept that Jesus is the Son of God, or that there is only one God, but to accept Jesus as the supreme authority in your life: after all, Jesus would have offered his life for any one of us if any one of us had been the only sinner in the world.

Jesus has the authority: Jesus tells the spirit in the man to be quiet and to come out of him. The spirit obeys him! By this time it is quite clear to anybody who is watching that Jesus has a level of power and authority that has been completely unknown.

Not just the man with the unclean spirit, but the scribes and all the teachers of the law must be desperately scared

of this new preacher by now. We have heard him teach with authority in a way that is not usual and now we have seen him cast an evil spirit out of a man.

This must have been terrifying behaviour for the leaders and probably for the ordinary people in the synagogue. Maybe they too were begging Jesus to stop:

"Leave us alone!"

Yet everybody is drawn to Jesus, whether they have an unclean spirit or not. Jesus is calling everybody to him. He is calling those who live in such terror of themselves that they must always hide their thoughts and feelings. He is calling those who cannot cope with their own individuality. He is calling those who are unable to tolerate the surroundings they find themselves living in.

At the time that Jesus started his ministry, there was much spiritual discontent and yearning. We had just seen people flocking to John the Baptist and his message to repent and be baptised as he gave his message of hope. We will soon see Jesus being challenged by the Jewish leaders on the slightest thing, because he is able to challenge them! He can confront them! He is fearless!

Anyhow, back to the man. He cried out with a loud voice. The man's cry is the cry of a man coming in out of the cold. It is the cry of someone reaching home at the end of a long, long journey. It is the cry of a man whose open wound has been healed at last. Relief sometimes makes people shout. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Lord.

But then what happens? Mark writes down presumably what Peter has told him.

"What happened next?"

"They were all amazed."

"But what did they say?"

"Well, what do you think they said?"

"What's this? What new doctrine is this?"

"Is that it?"

"Well, they said 'for with authority he even commands the evil spirits and they obey him!'"

So, what happened then?

News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee. This news is not simply news that spread around the region of Galilee two thousand years ago. It is news that has spread round the whole world, even to the ends of the earth. What I have told you today is just the beginning of the story. We have all heard the rest of the story, probably many times, but it continues with each and every one of us. This is the real adventure! We all know that Jesus is the Son of God, but the key question that we must all address is whether we just have that as knowledge in our heads, or whether we will act on that knowledge and transform our life by accepting the power and authority of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.