Sermon on Mark 1:21-28 (side glances at Deut 18:15-20 and 1 Cor 8:1-13)

Our bishop likes to say that when a parish experiences harmony at the core, the parish is poised for growth. In conversation with her about this I’ve come to understand that what she means is not that a parish and the people in it don’t have disagreements;

not that there isn’t anything amiss or askew or morally questionable about anything going on in the parish; a parish is made up of people after all, but, rather, there is nothing unalterably set against the key components of parish life: priest and other leaders working together; a priest and congregation ready and willing to explore renewed relationship with God and each other

As one gets more experience in this strange thing we attempt called “Church” i.e. living in a faith community, a place in which we jam up a strange amalgam of concerns, people, interests and needs, you begin to get a “sense of the whole;” you especially get a sense when a parish is off-kilter; you’ll sometimes hear “that place has a bad spirit about it,” or “there’s such a great feeling about \_\_\_”

Harmony at the core, difficult to describe but you feel it when you’re in it; difficult to determine causes of its absence yet you know it when it’s missing.

Even though Israel had made it back from exile; even though the temple sacrifices continued on unabated, those who were prophetically inclined, that is, had a good sense of the whole, could discern that there was not “harmony at the core” of Israel’s common life.

It wasn’t just Rome’s oppression though that was a big part of it; it was that key components of Israel’s identity were set against each other: leaders and people were often at odds; synagogue leaders and parishioners were looking for different things; there was, quite literally in terms of today’s reading, a bad spirit about the place.

Everyone knew that when the Messiah would come, he would exercise a ministry that would bring “shalom,” a holistic understanding of communal politics that would renew the covenant with God.

He would heal the sick, feed the hungry, indeed bring creation herself back into order; the Messiah would exercise a ministry of bringing harmony at the core and in so doing begin the process of bringing even the great enemies of Israel into line with this new order!

These events, which can seem so strange to many of us in the modern world, would have seemed signs of “the good spirit,” signs that Jesus just might be the one!

Of course, to us, any one or particular event we read about in the gospels is open to question. The modern mind is fixated on the historical; did this or that happen just this way, just the way it’s described?

Most scholars, and from widely differing theological backgrounds, take a different approach; whatever they think about any one event, they agree that on the whole Jesus did remarkable “mighty works;” people living in Jesus’ time and place believed him to be exercising a divine power and it makes sense for us, however attuned we are to the laws of physics, to take this testimony as credible and therefore with seriousness.

I listened to an interesting episode of the CBC show “Ideas” on Tuesday night of this past week recounting the work of anthropologist Wade Davis who is witness to the fact that many so-called “primitive cultures” actually have a far more sophisticated vision of what a human is than our narrow Western vision which finds many of us cut off from our environment with the result that we don’t see or understand the forces that truly shape us.

These “mighty works” of Jesus were taken by the people who were looking to God, not as one would take the strange doings of a magician or illusionist, but as someone who was able to deal with the forces that shape us.

They took these acts as the fulfillment of the true prophecy pointed at in our first reading: a belief that God’s Kingdom was coming close.

But even having said all of that there is something remarkable about what Jesus is doing not least in terms of his battle with what is literally, in the Greek, the Satan, the accuser and certain spirits that oppress people.

There were no predictions in the Hebrew scriptures that the Messiah would engage in this kind of ministry; nor, I should add, has this type of ministry, however Hollywood portrays it and maybe with a few exceptions, been a major focus of the life and work of the church.

Jesus and the gospel writers signal that something deeper than the expected Messianic battle with the physical and economic oppressors is taking place; something deeper than his battle with the religious rulers is taking place; perhaps we are meant to think: Jesus’ battle seems to be with those forces that control the forces that shape us!

Like when you watch the first Star Wars trilogy and it isn’t until the 3rd film that you’re exposed not just to Darth Vadar, that uber villain but to the ultimate dark power, the emperor himself!

What we see then in our reading today and what we will see in other instances in Mark’s gospel is not simply the release from what we might consider a “strange bondage” for a few poor unfortunate individuals.

Nor does it seem that our Lord is healing instances of what we now know to be “mental illness” or epilepsy.

If there is a connection we need to be careful because these texts have been used to stigmatize “mental illness” as some wild danger; not a comfortable stigma as some of us who suffer from mental illness understand;

and if any of you suffer from or know someone who’s had the misfortune of suffering an epileptic fit you know that what’s described in these scenes isn’t what’s going on either!

Like Wade Davis, who has opened for us the sophisticated, integrated view of divine powers, the world, and the community of different tribes in the Amazon basin, these exorcisms better serve windows into the depth of Jesus’ ministry.

Yes, there was a person involved and Jesus brought relief to this person, bringing them to a “soundness of mind,” by which may be meant some “mind healing” but is more likely an equivalent of shalom, wholeness, integration.

for when Jesus shows up these “spirits” somehow this gives voice to someone’s pain and the person is not marked out as evil but marked out for healing.

But addition the “voice” of the spirit and/or person speaks not only for itself/himself but for the group, a kind of reverse of the “canary in the coal mine.”

I find it remarkable and powerful that Jesus’ first exorcism takes place in a synagogue, “in church” as it were; not in the marketplace, not in the village square but in a house of worship; at the foundation of Israel’s life and being.

The deep healing our culture and society craves though is afraid to approach must begin in communities of faith; if “the good spirit” is welcome here, there is hope; if communities of faith collude with the powers of darkness than we can expect that our society is in for a rough ride indeed!

And so we see that the parishioner effected becomes the conduit through which the electricity can flow, through which the intent of the depth of Jesus’ ministry can be revealed.

Using the language of our powerful and radical second reading, the “weak” link becomes, in his weakness, the one who reveals what the strong can’t, the hidden hurts of the community.

Jesus is among us to do what no surface “rearranging of the deck chairs” can do; he is here to right the ship itself! Jesus is the one who exposes where the underwater icebergs have ripped away at our personal and communal fabric; he exposes our underground fears, “God, have you come to destroy us?” “Is there a future for us? For me?”

When Jesus is among us you and I become less afraid to be honest about our deep hurts, and declare who Jesus is! In terms of last week’s sermon we become more courageous!

And when he does there is healing and hope in even his strongest words, “Silence, come out of him/them/us!” He’s not shutting the man down but creating, not for more words but for healing, for awareness of God in the depths; for a replacement of the bad spirit with a good one.

We should expect then, as we listen to all the voices of our community that a certain “canary in the coal mine” effect will be present; that weakness will reveal Christ’s strength, however awkward that sometimes is.

We know that Harmony at the core is what Christ is after; and as we come to the table that is Christ’s very Presence among us we take the risk to trust that Christ’s “mighty works” are possible still! Amen.