

What is this?

What do you want with us Jesus?

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church January 31st, 2021 – Mark 1:21-28 & 1 Corinthians 8:1-13)

I once was called to see a client who was distressed. She had severe anxiety amongst other things. Her house was lovely and tidy and full of her craft work. When I got there, she wouldn't look at me, and then would pace up and down the room. I really didn't know what to do to help her, we eventually struck up a conversation about her craft. I left once she assured me that she would be safe. On other visits after that I had to check she wasn't trying to overdose and would try everything to calm her down. She was tormented by an early childhood trauma and now had anxiety and paranoia.

The torment this woman suffered stayed with me for a long time and when I was sitting in my monthly supervision session, I could only describe it as being tormented by evil or 'demons'. I have since worked with others with similar issues.

The man in Mark's gospel was similarly tormented. Illness and especially mental health issues in Jesus time was attributed to 'evil spirits'. It, as this story will show, not something that God wants for people. The absolute torment he has, is identified by it being referred to as a 'mob'.

Jesus is on the road with his disciples, on the way to another place – Capernaum. Being a sabbath he headed to the synagogue as was his practice. He is teaching with authority, teaching in a way vastly different to the normal teachers. Those teachers were learned men, 'professional theologians', but somehow their teaching didn't compare to Jesus.

What is this, the people ask. The people are amazed at the teaching of Jesus. Mark does not record for us exactly what Jesus said, but clearly it affected the listeners. They were amazed, even more amazed, when he releases the man from his torment. So amazed, that, the story of Jesus and what he says and does spreads quickly throughout the region.

Perhaps there is something new about this teaching? Perhaps there is a deep experience of the presence of God they feel as they listen? Perhaps his teaching and actions marry up? Perhaps he is inviting them to something rather than telling them how to live or what they have done wrong or not measured up to? Perhaps instead of powering over others he was empowering them?

Perhaps, as they watch Jesus release the man from his torment, they see him practising what he preaches – love, liberation. Love for who they were. Liberation and freedom from false hopes, false ideas, fears, standards that were impossible to live up to, formal ways of expressing faith and spirituality, false images of God.

Instead, perhaps Jesus preaches something new, perhaps he preaches freedom 'to' something – freedom to love, freedom to give our very selves, not some finessed version of who we are, to the service of God. The message to love is always new. Perhaps Jesus is inviting them and us to take the path of generosity and care.

Jesus at the beginning of his ministry in the Gospel of Mark has called some fishermen to follow and now has released a man from his torment. In this story he has clearly shown us that he is opposed to the forces of evil, that is something, that he will practise for the rest of his life.

In our other reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians we are encouraged to think about not being stumbling blocks. He too talks about freedom – as Christians we are free to do anything, as it is not what we eat that makes us unclean. Paul too is teaching a new thing, like Jesus he is offering liberation but with a proviso. We should not practice such freedom in a detrimental way, in a way that causes others to stumble.

The gospel offers us freedom. Freedom to love and care for others. As followers we are called to not just practise freedom but to also release others from that which binds them or torments them.

As the man tormented asked Jesus – what do you have to do with us, perhaps we need to listen and see who is asking the same question. When we hear them then we need to find ways to release them from their torment. It might mean that we need to think about how we help asylum seekers live freely in this land. It might mean thinking about how we continue to house the homeless once this pandemic is over. It might mean thinking about how we offer friendship and generosity to those alone, anxious or depressed. It might mean thinking about how we converse with those who think differently than us.

We also need to ask the question as well – Jesus what is that you want with us? Maybe it is to just rest in his love? Maybe it is to let him release us from that which binds us, that which drags us down, that which makes us anxious, that which wants to fight with God, that which fights what is best for us? Maybe it is to hear the gospel in a new way? Maybe it is to let go of past practices both good and bad that get in the way of loving and being free?

Releasing the man from his torment showed how Jesus practice matched his teaching. Both his teaching and action reveal the liberating aspect of Jesus' ministry.

What is it that Jesus wants us to do as a church in 2021?

What is it that Jesus wants you to do as an individual in 2021?

May 2021 be a year that for the church and us as individuals, where it becomes clearer and clearer what Jesus would have us do. May his words and actions stir us, challenge us, disturb us, as we realise, he wants much with us. Amen.