

Texts: Mark 1:21–28

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

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Let's start with the bad news. For weeks I've been wondering, 'Has Christianity failed?' Looking at the ongoing chain of murder in our world – in the high school shooting in Kentucky and in the terrorist attack in Afghanistan this week, in the daily abortions taking place in this country; looking at peoples' lives being destroyed by slavery to addictions or by their poverty; wondering if the Christian values we claim with our lips actually make any difference in our lives – and I include myself in that judgment – I've been despairing about the worthwhileness of Christianity and have been wondering: has Christianity failed?

But reading the Bible this morning, hearing the Word of God at Mass, we come to the good news. God's message to us is clear: the success of Christianity does not depend upon our personal successes or failures at putting it into practice, but upon the power of the promised prophet God has sent into the world to fight for us, God's messenger – his Son Jesus, the savior of the world.

At the time Jesus appeared upon the scene in northern Israel, Jews were wondering if the Jewish faith had failed. Their country – the land of the chosen people of God – was occupied by the foreign, pagan army of the Roman Empire. Their Jewish government leaders were corrupt and money-grabbing. Big business was destroying their small business and families as more and more people had to go to work for those big businesses to make enough money to pay for the excessive taxes being put upon them. Even the Jewish religious leaders seemed more interested in charging the faithful for services rendered than in sharing the message of God's power and hope. That's why people were flocking to be baptized by John the Baptist as a sign that they had repented and returned to God, in hopes that God would step in and take action.

Then, today, Jesus appears in their midst at a worship service – and they are amazed because here is a man who is preaching about God's power and hope because he is speaking like someone who has firsthand experience, who has *authority* to share this message because he *knows* God personally.

And then, Jesus proves that God *has* taken action. Jesus proves that the power of God is there,

with them, in spite of what they have been experiencing them, in spite of their hopelessness. In the middle of worship, a man starts shouting against Jesus. Immediately, Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit in the man and orders the unclean spirit out of the man. That's all the proof the worshippers that day need that God's Kingdom is here and Jesus is the messenger, the prophet of God promised by Moses. For centuries, the voice of God and the power of the Holy Spirit had been absent among the Jews, the chosen people of God. That's why they felt their faith had failed. But today, when Jesus drives out the unclean spirit, those worshippers know that the Holy Spirit of God is back in town in this man Jesus. Jesus takes action and shows that the power of God is on the move again on the earth, that God is in charge over our lives, directing history, and the power of the unclean spirits that torment us is just a bunch of trash-talking that can cause us grief, pain and struggle, but without final, ultimate authority. While Jesus is preaching, the unclean spirit in that man screams at Jesus, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are - the Holy One of God.' The demons recognize that Jesus is God's prophet promised by Moses, God's messenger who is backed up by God's power because he is the son of God come to earth. Jesus' answer to the demon is 'Yes! Yes, I have come to destroy demons. I have come to destroy what is destroying my children'—an answer Jesus gives by overpowering the demon with God's power.

I believe demons are real. We experience the power of demons in the evils that oppress us - in addictions, in despair, in the burden of poverty, in whatever afflicts our hearts and minds with destructive force - and we experience the power of demons in the evils that they perpetrate through human action - in high school shootings, in terrorist killings, in abortion, in abuse of children, spouses and the elderly, in euthanasia, and so much more. *You* don't have to believe in demons to see their power all around us in the world, in our families, in our own lives, in whatever destroys us. It's what led me to think 'Christianity has failed.' But God has sent us a champion to fight for us with power and win - and that champion is Jesus of Nazareth.

That power of Jesus, to destroy what is destroying us, is promised to us today—usually not for an immediate solution, but to help us fight against the unclean spirits that afflict us and torment our lives, if we can surrender our hearts to Jesus and be open to his power *today*. We've sung the psalm today: "If *today* you hear his voice, harden not your hearts." *Today* is the day Jesus is taking action

in our lives and promising to keep taking action; *today* is the day you and I can take action to harden not our hearts, and respond to Jesus here with us, driving out the demons, the unclean spirits oppressing our world, oppressing us. *Today*, because of Jesus, God's power is here in this church, just as God's power was in that worship service centuries ago because of Jesus. What do we want to do to join forces with Jesus in driving the unclean spirits out of our world and out of our lives? I recommend starting with a new little book put out by our American bishops called, *Prayers Against the Powers of Darkness*. It's only \$6, small enough to carry around, and is a great place to begin joining forces with Jesus in the fight against the Evil One. *Prayers Against the Powers of Darkness*.

St Mark, in the Gospel story, says Jesus ordered the unclean spirit - one spirit - out of the man. But the unclean spirits themselves speak in the plural: "What have you to do with *us*, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy *us*?" Because the demons that occupy us and wreak such havoc and grief in our lives are intertwined - they never come alone. There are three demons in my life, all interconnected: the unclean spirits of anger, of judging others, and of insecurity. Some days I'm right there with Jesus, rebuking those unclean spirits and ordering them out of my life. Other days, I'm having those demons over for dinner, perversely enjoying their company. All of which is to say: the fight is not easy. There's no instantaneous solution. It's day by day - progress, not perfection, as they say in AA, until that final day when the power of Jesus brings the world into everlasting glory and we walk through the door of the Father's house to a hero's welcome. But we have to start somewhere, and usually *restart* each day. Today, Jesus is here to remind us not to lose heart in the fight against demons, because it is in his victorious power that we fight on.