

“EXPECTATIONS - (Mark 4)”
Mark 1:21-34

Mark has prefaced his account of the life of Jesus with the announcement that this is the beginning of the good news of the Kingdom of God - this is what the people have been waiting for. The new sovereign rule of God is about to break into this world: and it is all to do with Jesus. John the Baptist has called on people to prepare themselves for the arrival of this appointed and anointed Son of God, who will turn their world upside down and fill their hearts with the fire of his Holy Spirit. And, as we saw last time, Jesus himself has appeared on the horizon, proclaiming a radically new agenda for life, offering people the opportunity to give up their own agendas and trust Jesus for his. He wants people to make a clean break and move on into the future with him. It's exciting stuff. But, as we've said before, it wasn't unique.

There were plenty of other people wandering through the hills and villages of Palestine claiming to be the chosen one, the Messiah. The dusty roads of first century Palestine had their own share of David Ickes and Benjamin Cremes. The people who went to hear Jesus would probably have done so out of a sense of curiosity - maybe even to poke fun or to argue fiercely over some weird aspect of the preacher's teaching. They had their expectations - or so they thought. And we have ours: each of us thinks we know what to expect. Just as we have our own agendas for living, so we have our own worldviews, our own ways of making sense of this world.

In this next episode in Mark's story, we see Jesus blowing great holes in people's expectations, forcing them to look at things differently. And it also confronts us with a challenge to our expectations, a challenge we must all face up to if we are to allow these "*good tidings*" to have any effect on our lives at all. As we look at this part of the story, there are a couple of things we need to explain as well, which will help us to appreciate a little more clearly some of the things which Mark's first readers obviously took more or less for granted.

The first of those is the synagogue. It's the Sabbath - Friday sunset to Saturday sunset, a time in which no work can be done and the movements and activity of God's people are severely restricted. The Sabbath, the day of rest, is a gift to God's people, a sacred space in which they can step aside from the routine and pressure of the working week to rest, relax and worship. And on the Sabbath, as at one or two other times during the week, the people go to meet together in order to worship God and listen to his word being read and interpreted. When the people of Israel were in Exile in Babylon, they arranged to meet together in groups which were known as "synagogues" - literally, "talking together". Wherever you could find ten married Jewish men, you could start a synagogue. I suppose it was a bit like a house church. When the

people returned from their time in exile, they kept up the custom and began to put up special buildings in which to meet. It was something that gave them a sense of identity and provided a religious and social focus for their communities. The synagogue became the centre of their lives - a place of worship, of teaching, of debate, of fellowship. That's why Jesus often goes into the synagogues in Mark's story.

It was into the synagogue at Capernaum that Jesus went with his new-found friends on this particular Sabbath. There wasn't a full time rabbi, so each week different people from within the synagogue would be invited to say a few words. Jesus arrived as the visitor, with a few friends who were clearly disciples of his, so he was asked to fill the preaching slot that day. Now the people who were there had their expectations of what would happen - just as you have some expectation of what might happen here on a Sunday morning. They were used to hearing from "*the teachers of the law*" or "*the scribes*". That's the second thing we just need to explain, because these people crop up again and again in this story - usually arguing with Jesus. These were men who concerned themselves professionally with the Law. They were usually referred to as "Rabbi" and spent their days poring over the Law of Moses, interpreting each Law for their time, updating them, adding to them and generally ensuring that the people knew what they were allowed to do and what would happen to them if they tried something they weren't allowed to do. Most of their teaching was backed up by reference to other authorities and teachers and writings. They were the upholders of tradition, the arch-conservatives who could not cope with radical change or with any kind of challenge to the status quo. In their desire to uphold the Law, they had forgotten why they had the Law in the first place.

So, as the people sat there that Saturday morning and watched Jesus move to the front, they expected more of the same. Now it's interesting that Mark in his story of Jesus makes a lot of the fact that Jesus taught, but he doesn't tell us a great deal about **what** he taught - certainly not as much as the other gospel writers. What he does emphasise, though, is **how** he taught, the effect of his teaching. Here he tells us that the people were "*amazed*". The Greek word he uses there is a very strong one, which is based on a verb meaning "to strike". It has a similar force and meaning, therefore, to our (to some, rather vulgar) expression, "*they were gobsmacked*". These people were knocked sideways as they listened to Jesus' teaching "*because he taught them as one who had authority*". Jesus wasn't quoting from all the old rabbis, rehashing other people's writings, relying on a grasp of the minutiae of the law to impress and add weight to his words. What he was saying seemed to come with its own authority, almost as if it came straight from the mouth of God himself. Their expectations were dealt a severe blow and they realised that, yes, this was someone worth listening to.

And as we shall see as we move on through this little book, Mark doesn't really need to tell us exactly what Jesus actually said, because the actions that accompany it are the real focus of his attention. This is the word of God in action. As a commentator called Gnilyka writes, "*the deed explains the word*". Hugh Anderson puts it like this: "*When Jesus taught, things did not stay as they were, but God himself was on the move against all the evil forces of the world.*" As Jesus is teaching and his words make it clear that this is indeed the inauguration of the Kingdom of God, that the new reign of God is breaking into this world to root out and destroy evil, those who have most to lose suddenly get scared. And in this case, those who have most to lose are the powers of evil, the demons.

A man stands up in the congregation and through his mouth the demons that have been at work within him cry out, identifying Jesus and saying, "*He's come to destroy us*". They, at least, can see which way the wind is blowing. (The question that the NIV uses to translate this, by the way, isn't necessarily there in the Greek - it can be either a statement or a question.) They expect to be destroyed when God's Kingdom is fully come. And with another word of authority, Jesus tells them, literally, to "*be muzzled*". When he's around they have no power, not even the power to shut up - they have to be muzzled by the power of Jesus himself. They have a last thrash around in the man's body and then leave - going we know not where. There will be other opportunities to talk about demons later in this book, so I won't say any more specifically about them today, but just note that once again the people's expectations are upset as Jesus speaks into the situation with a unique authority.

Well. what happens to the visiting speaker after the service? He goes off to lunch with one of the congregation. Simon, one of his newly appointed "*fishers of men*" takes him home to meet the wife and the wife's mother. Unfortunately, when they get there, the wife's mother is ill with the 'flu. We don't know whether it's life-threatening or not, but Jesus doesn't like to see her that way, so he reaches out to touch her and she suddenly becomes well once again and is able to get dinner ready. Just in passing, note that when Jesus is dealing with what we might call "ordinary" illnesses, he heals with a touch: when he is dealing with the demonic he heals simply with a command.

By this time word has got around. Those who were in the synagogue and those who were in and around Simon's home see what Jesus has done and people's expectations are now raised to a much higher plane. As the sun goes down, signifying the end of the Sabbath, and once again people are permitted to carry the sick and injured through the streets, the people flock to the doors of Simon's house in the hope that Jesus will heal. And, of course, he does, dealing both with diseases and with demons. The people's expectations had been both challenged by what Jesus said in the synagogue, and met by his healing actions.

But this episode is also a challenge to our expectations twenty centuries later, and it's a challenge we must confront if we are to make the most of this little book of Mark's - indeed, if we to gain any benefit at all from the gospel of the Kingdom. You see, most of us here this morning look at this story - and the other stories like them in the other gospels - and assume that this is all about something that happened two thousand years ago, that such things just don't happen today. Despite the ways in which the demonic and the supernatural find their way on to our cinema and television screens through such films as *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist*, we don't find we can take these things seriously. There is an enormous difference in worldview between the people who were contemporary with Mark and Jesus and the culture of which we are a part today.

By "worldview" I mean the ways we try to make sense of our world, the ideas and philosophies we use to ensure that we can explain what happens around us each day. Most of us don't create our worldview, we take it on trust from the culture of which we're a part. Everyone else thinks in a particular way, that way of thinking is communicated through our education system and so on, and we just take it as read. Mark narrates this episode in a very matter-of-fact way. For him, this happened, just as he describes it. Jesus dealt with it in a very straightforward manner. He simply told the demon to shut up and get out. He didn't try to explain it - certainly not explain it away.

Many of us, though, will look on this as the account of a superstitious people who have no scientific framework by which to explain all this. This is primitive thinking and today we would explain away the demonic and the supernatural by means of psychology and psychiatry. We would talk about sociological factors and cultural expectations (as, in fact, I've just done). We do not expect inexplicable things to happen. There will be rational explanation - at least, that's what science has tried to tell us from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries on.

Now I don't think any of us would dispute that there is a huge difference in worldview between these first century Palestinian peasants and us twenty-first century educated westerners - not when we stop and think about it. The question is, how do we respond to that? We can either say (in that somewhat patronising way that we have), "Well, we live in a scientific age and we know better. We have the benefit of all kinds of knowledge that Mark and his contemporaries never had, and there are perfectly rational explanations for all this. We don't need to use concepts like demonic and supernatural any more." Or we can say, "We live in a scientific age where we have been conditioned by our education and our mass media to reject any possibility of the supernatural, whether it exists or not. We live in a world which is rapidly becoming

devoid of awe and wonder and if we cannot measure, weigh or evaluate things then they are not worth knowing about.”

I would suggest to you this morning that we need to take seriously the second of those approaches. There are an increasing number of scientists who are acknowledging that we do not live in a totally closed system where everything can be explained and predicted. The idea of a scientific system in which everything can be explained rationally is breaking down under the pressure of post-modern philosophy and in the light of the reality that there is, in fact, a heck of a lot more that we cannot explain than we can.

As Christians - as human beings - we need to open up our thinking, to recognise that our scientific worldview is no longer adequate. Whatever else you may think of John Wimber, one of his great legacies to the church was that he encouraged people think outside the box, to accept that there is more to this creation than the concrete and the compartmentalised. When I was at theological college, one of my lecturers was Dr. Roger Cowley. He was one of the world's greatest authorities on Ancient Coptic Bible commentaries, a hugely talented scholar, but not, alas! a terribly scintillating lecturer. He had his own ideas of how the world worked and so on. But God broke into his life and suddenly confronted him with the challenge to his worldview that Mark gives us here this morning - and his life and ministry were transformed. If you want to think a bit more about this, try to get hold of Harry Blamires' excellent book *The Christian Mind*, which shows up the bankruptcy of trying to live as a Christian with a secular worldview that allows no place for the supernatural and the godly.

This gospel of Mark - the gospel, the good tidings of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God - will make no sense to us if we do not accept the possibilities of the supernatural. This world of brick and mortar, of concrete and glass - even this world of mountains and rivers - is not all there is. There is a reality beyond this. There is a spiritual realm - and within that realm there are great battles being fought between the forces of good and the forces of evil. (Don't worry, though - we know who the winner is!)

Part of the reason, I believe, for the poverty of our Christian experience is that we fail to expect great things from God in our day to day existence. We are prepared to put up with a thin and weedy experience of life because we have shut out the vast panorama of God's sovereign activity. We pray for healing in a half-hearted way because we expect the drugs to work and put more faith in them than in the power of God. We put up with difficulties and problems because we pray with limited faith, not expecting God to work in unlimited ways. We lose out on the awe and wonder that should be ours when we look at this world because we fail to see beyond the obvious and the explicable. We wouldn't explain the beauty of a Mahler symphony by drawing diagrams of sound waves or explaining the action of horsehair on cat-gut

and vibrating air in brass tubes. We wouldn't reduce a discussion of the art of Van Gogh or Monet to a series of equations about light waves coming off coloured pigments. We wouldn't communicate anything of the power of a Michelangelo sculpture if we referred only to the geological structure of marble. There is something above and beyond the raw facts that engenders within us a sense of awe - and the same is true when we talk of God and of the world he has created.

If you read this story of the authority and power of Jesus in the supernatural realm as simply Mark's pitiful and primitive way of describing what we now assume we can explain in other rational ways, then it's really a waste of time. But if you accept this as a doorway into an experience of God's infinite and awesome love and sovereign activity in every part of your life, then the possibilities are endless. We come here week by week to worship a great God. And in his Son Jesus that power and majesty and wonder and awe and love and greatness have broken into the world to give us a taste of things to come, to give us a glimpse of the possibilities. You don't need, as Timothy Leary and others tried to convince an earlier generation, chemicals and laboratory compounds (drugs) to expand your mind: you need the help of God's Holy Spirit.

Pray that God will help you to catch something of his greatness and that your over-reliance on the rational and scientific will not get in the way of receiving from him all that he has for you in this life and the next. Now I know I haven't dealt specifically with demons this morning - that will come a bit later - but it's important, I think to establish the basis on which we read this story of Mark's. We are reading a true account and if it doesn't tie up with our expectations, then we need firstly perhaps to examine our expectations rather than assuming Mark's shortcomings.