

## **NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH**

**SUNDAY 29 JANUARY 2012**

**Rev. Deacon Jenny Preston**

**Mark 1: 21-28; Deuteronomy 18: 15-20**

### **“With Authority?”**

The synagogue was the meeting place for the Jewish people - teaching of their faith, and traditions, worship, remembering that as a people they'd had to learn some big lessons from not following their faith, by forgetting their God - going into exile, and coming back etc.

The leader, or hazzan, would read the particular texts for that Sabbath, first from the Torah - the first 5 books of the Old Testament, then a text from the Prophets, then any adult male could deliver the short sermon.

Mark doesn't have Jesus teaching in Nazareth like Luke, rather he has the ministry of teaching beginning in Capernaum. Scholars call this short passage - of 8 verses - a sandwich text: verses 21 and 22 describe Jesus' coming to the synagogue to teach, with authority, or power; verses 27 and 28 describe Jesus' words as amazing, astounding, as having authority, having command; and verses 23-26 describe Jesus' delivering the troubled man from an unclean spirit.

The people of Capernaum would have heard the unclean spirit calling out three things: 1. *You are Jesus of Nazareth*; I know who you are socially; 2. *are you here to harm us?* what do you want with us? /fear; 3. *I know who you are, you are the Holy One of God*; acknowledges Jesus as having spiritual status.

Whatever happened in this healing story, the outcast man, this socially unacceptable man, this untouchable man was restored to his community; liberated from a way of being which kept him apart from his community; Jesus has demonstrated that God's desire is for the wholeness of each created being.

However, as Rev Bill Loader, UCA Professor of New Testament, says, “however we understand exorcisms, those reported from the ancient world or from present day cultures unlike our own, *something real is happening. People are being set free.* Physical contortions and hugely dramatic moments will occur in many different therapies, whether the frame of thought is demonology or modern psychotherapy.”

The central news of the gospel is in enabling people to be how God made them to be. Addressing powers and gods that enslave. Healing all forms of madness. It helps to note that to be 'unclean' in the Jewish community was to be ritually unclean, not permitted to join those who were attending the synagogue.

No wonder that the people of Capernaum began to gossip the good news: the person whose illness, whose medical condition or disability excluded them from the company, the comfort of belonging to the community, has now been made well, is to be included as one of us.

There are two points I'd like to draw out of this passage: the people were amazed at the authority of Jesus;; the man who was untouchable is now included.

The passage Pam read us from Deuteronomy contains God's promise that God's world will never be without a person who can speak the Word of God with authority. But how do we know who has the authority to speak on God's behalf? The church has often thought it was right to be involved in some events, and got it wrong.

We know, all of us, how sometimes our church, in fact, the world wide Christian church, has spoken and acted with authority, but it has turned out to be the wrong slant on authority - and you know lots of examples: the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the burning of witches in Scotland, the condemnation of unmarried mothers, and one current example which has gripped me: excluding persons with dementia from partaking of the Sacraments .- more on this at another time.

These forms of alienation, and isolation from the fellowship of the body of the church, are now, in most cases, seen to be totally against Jesus' longing for every person to be released from whatever captivity they are in.

How can we discern God's longings, God's dream and speak or act with God's power and authority? One well regarded way forward is through following the pattern of the Wesleyan quadrilateral, that is, a four-fold way of examining a theological issue - firstly by understanding what the scripture says, followed by being aware of ways our tradition has interpreted this issue, and with the application of 21st. century reason and of personal experience, find a path for reflection and action in God's name.

Rev Andy Calder, has, after a time directing chaplaincy at Epworth Hospital, come back to head our UCA Disability Ministry. Last year he published this book entitled: Disability & Inclusion in Faith Communities. It was a multifaith perspective, gaining input from Buddhist, Christian, Jewish & Muslim perspectives. The State Government helped with a research grant.

The working title says a great deal: **To belong, I need to be missed**.- that is, the person with a disability wants to move from being 'a stranger' to being 'a member', to be a member is to belong, in both name and experience.

At Heidelberg UCA over a period of many years I worked with young and older persons living with various disabilities - mental, physical and intellectual, so I'm very aware of the way stigma is associated with anything that seems different.

Out of that experience, we formed a group for younger persons, called GOAL: its letters mean "Growth Onwards in Achievement And Learning". And we set about helping the members to work on their skills, and to help them with specific issues. Grants from the local council helped buy computers; they now participate in Awakenings, the UCA Disability four-day weekend at Horsham, and they teach computer skills to persons over 50 years of age. - federal government providing the equipment. They participate in worship through liturgical dance, readings and singing.

Jeff Kennett and Beyond Blue have done a great deal to publicise the fact that at least one in every 5 persons is troubled by diseases which appear socially unacceptable, helping us to realize that persons can be helped to become more whole as a person, whether or not the illness is totally cured. And speaking about acknowledging periods of depression is much less frightening than it was. Although I see in the paper this week that the government is cutting out the Mental Health phone line!

James Godfrey, Peter Sanders and Pam White, ministers of our UCA, pastor to people living with mental illness. These three ministries struggle to raise adequate funding. Rev John Bottomley prepared this report, **Spirit of Yearning, Spirit of Service**, sponsored by our presbytery, to help

members of the UCA within the presbytery understand more completely the value of the sacred friendship which is offered in the name of Christ through these three ministries - one in West Heidelberg, one in Ringwood, the other at Kew. I would encourage you to borrow one of the copies in the stand in the narthex.

James describes how X told him: your visit gave me a renewed sense of value for my life. While the visit James made was one of many he made each week, for X it was a sign that his life mattered to at least one other person. James had left the visit wishing he could offer more towards a fuller life, and doubting his own ministry, feeling inadequate.

Later, James, through this response, became aware of the power and value of *the intangible - the care, concern, encouragement, affirmation, being known, being heard, and witnessing to the sacredness of a human being's journey.*

He describes this power. with *assistance from Shakespeare:*

the quality of mercy is not strain'd  
it droppeth like the gentle rain from heaven  
upon the earth beneath: it is twice blest;  
it blesseth him that gives and him that takes (*Merchant of Venice*, Act 4, scene 1).

Shakespeare's poetic gaze on mercy's quality echoes the affirmation of Christian spirituality about grace, and its foundational quality for the restoration of relationships. In contrast to assumptions of western society's market economy that goods are scarce, and people must compete to meet their needs, Shakespeare also reminds us that mercy given and received is mercy twice blessed. There is abundance in the mystery of love that grows as it is given away.

Within our own context as a congregation, we experience moments of astounding understanding between us; this can occur in a pastoral visit, and also in a chance cup-of coffee in the Mocha Pot, or waiting at the doctor's, or in the village grocer shop.

Somehow a need or heavy burden which has been long unexpressed blurts out, - it may be a realization of a shared fear, and the recipient, from somewhere deep inside, has the grace to respond with acceptance and validation. George Eliot, 19th. century writer, writes about the gift of being heard, respected, and acknowledged.

"Oh, the comfort, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person, having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but pouring them all out, just as they are, chaff and grain together, certain that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and with a breath of kindness blow the rest away."

Individually, as a faith community, and as a church, we have the power to act on behalf of Jesus, our Christ. Where we recognize the person who is, or feels untouchable, alienated, of no value, we can be the agent which precipitates a step forward on the path to acceptance and wholeness. We will be bearing witness to the intrinsic and inalienable sacredness of the human person, as demonstrated by Jesus in this first healing story in the Gospel of Mark. Amen.