

Prayer

Lord God, You have walked with Your people over thousands of years. You have doubtless rejoiced in the beauty and wonder of what they do, and yet despaired at the foolishness of some of what is done without reference to You. You have all the resources we need in order to be fulfilled and successful; so may we have the humility to ask You to help us in the midst of every situation we face and everything we do: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Pray out loud and give the Lord praise and glory; then, be quiet and submit to Him as Lord of all

On-going prayers

- **Pray for your neighbours** *Pray about issues of concern in your neighbourhood, vandalism, planning, nuisance or traffic, for example*
- *Give thanks to God for people who help others selflessly*
- *Pray about the management of fishing in the world's oceans*

Meditation

Look around, stand tall and keep alert
The Spirit of Christ is burning all around
And the majesty of His work is only just beginning
To be known within our generation

The Spirit of Christ is burning
With the admonishment of wickedness;
To consume the immoral heart and myriad iniquities
That hides within the confines of the living.

The Spirit of Christ is burning, heated
In sins condemnation, yet hotter still in passion
For the saved souls for which it yearns.
Burning to complete its eternal work and rejoice!

Look around, things may not be what they seem;
The Spirit of Christ is burning, all around,
Consuming the chaff, the mire of human filth
Proving the passion of Christ to expose pure gold in us.

Bible passage - Luke 4:31-37

³¹ So He went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and began to teach the people on the Sabbath. ³² They were astonished at his teaching, because His message had authority.

³³ In the synagogue there was a man with the spirit of an unclean demon, and he shouted out in a loud voice; ³⁴ 'Aargh! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are; the Holy One of God!' ³⁵ Jesus rebuked the demon and said 'Silence! Come out of him!' Then the demon threw the man down in front of them all and came out of him without causing injury. ³⁶ The people were all amazed and said to each other, 'What is this message? He gives orders to evil spirits with authority and power, and they come out!'

³⁷ News about him then spread to every place in the region.

Bible Study

Review

After the disturbing sequence of events at Nazareth, it is understandable that Jesus should want to get away from his home town. It did not, however, divert Him from His message and His ministry, because Jesus immediately went to the synagogue in Capernaum to teach on the Sabbath. Now at Nazareth, the people were amazed at Jesus' teaching, but in Capernaum there is no record of dissent and instead of questioning Him (as at Nazareth – 4:22,23), they accepted that 'His message had authority' (4:32). Indeed, we will find out tomorrow that in response to what they had heard and seen of Jesus the sick came to Him for healing (4:40-41). This is how Capernaum became the first base of Jesus' ministry.

Although the reaction at Capernaum was laudably different from that at Nazareth, one individual did not appreciate Jesus' presence! The man had the 'spirit of an unclean demon' (4:33), and it is difficult for us to understand exactly what this means. It has been suggested that he was ritually impure ('unclean') and should not have been at the synagogue, or His impurity could have been due to illness or untended wounds or blood (for attitudes towards blood, see Leviticus 12:7, 17:11,14). However, the behaviour of the man was aggressive (4:34), so it could be that he was regarded as evil and was either barely tolerated within the community or usually kept outside. He was certainly disruptive in the synagogue!

Today, we know a variety of reasons why someone could have acted like this (we will look at this later in the study), but to interpret the story, we must seek to understand what happened as Luke did. However distressing the nature of demon possession and various attitudes toward this over the centuries, it remains true that Jesus' role was to deal with the problem and evict demons from people and from the presence of their communities. Consequently, God's people have the Gospel task of confronting and evicting all forms of evil within the world today, and it is not a small or insignificant task.

Our whole story today is like a battle between Jesus and the powers of evil. Jesus had only recently fought the devil in the desert (4:1-13), but this was not to be the limit of Satan's powers. Immediately Jesus began His ministry He was nearly killed in Nazareth (4:29), and then, this man spoke up in the midst of a receptive congregation and confronted Jesus head on! He shouted loudly with an indescribably cry (4:34), then identified Jesus not just as '*Jesus of Nazareth*', but as '*the Holy One of God*!' This was no ordinary speech, and no normal person would have spoken to Jesus in this way at that time. For one small moment, the demon possessed man presented a challenge to Jesus' authority and power, but it lasted no longer than the time it took Jesus to rebuke the demon and cast him out of the suffering individual in whom he dwelt.

Jesus won the battle against the powers of evil by His words and with His authority. He addressed the evil directly, confirming the power and authority that the people of Capernaum had observed earlier (4:32). Then, we should notice that Luke's report shows us the difference between the cynical use of humanity by evil, and the love and compassion of Jesus. For the demon threw the man on the ground '*in front of them all*' (4:35) and they no doubt expected the man to be severely affected by this violent assault. However, by the mercy of God at work in Jesus' ministry, the eviction of the demon from the man left him unhurt (4:35)!

The people of Capernaum were used to the presence in their communities of various miracle workers and healers who dealt with people using superstitious beliefs and 'therapies' including incantations and potions; but the results often left people no better and often worse. In Jesus, they were presented with the sure evidence of God's power at work; not only was His authority effective, but it brought healing (4:36)! No wonder that '*news about Him spread to every place in the region*' (4:37).

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- What is the evidence that Capernaum was the place where Jesus' ministry began?
- Does 'having a demon' have any real meaning today?
- What was the nature of the confrontation between Jesus and the demon?

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V31 'So He down over to Capernaum ...'

The Greek word means 'to go down, arrive or land'. On the one hand, this does indeed infer going 'downhill', but it also contains a sense of purpose. The reason for Jesus' journey to

Capernaum was His need to get out of Nazareth where the townspeople had attempted to throw Him off a cliff! Jesus went there to get away from those who wanted to kill Him.

V32 'message'

In verses 32 and verse 36 you will find the word 'message'. In each case, this translates the Greek word 'logos', which is often translated 'Word'. It can indeed mean a simple 'word', but just as we might say to a preacher 'preach the word', 'logos' could be used to mean a message characteristic of the one who delivers it. There is little doubt that early Christians would have recognised the word 'logos' here and connected this strongly with the person and work of Jesus, who is Himself described as the 'Word' in John's Gospel (see John 1:1f.).

Significant phrases

V33 'the spirit of an unclean demon'

Other translations:

'a demon, an evil spirit' (NIV)

'the spirit of an unclean devil' (New Jerusalem)

This phrase translates three words in Greek, the first being 'spirit' ('pneuma'), the second being 'demon' ('diamoniov'), and the third being 'unclean' ('akathartos'). The translation I have given is the usual one, though the matter is complicated by the fact that there are a number of places in Scripture where the first and third words ('pneuma akathartos') are put together to mean, quite simply, 'evil spirit'. This is why the NIV translates 'a demon, an evil spirit'. The fact that demons are described in a significant number of different ways within Scripture suggests that there were different attitudes towards them then, as today.

V34 'what do you what with us ...'

Other translations:

'what have you to do with us' (NRSV)

'what business do we have with each other' (New American)

The phrase used here occurs one or two other times in the New Testament as challenges to Jesus from demons. Literally, it reads, 'what is it to us and to you?' It is relatively easy to imagine what this means, but hard to put into words that read well in a formal translation! It seems at least to be an aggressive form of rejection.

Going Deeper

What is the evidence that Capernaum was the place where Jesus' ministry began?

Luke chapter four tells us that Jesus came back from the desert after baptism, sought to teach in Nazareth, but due to rejection, went to Capernaum to begin His ministry. The sequence is relatively understandable, except that in the middle of the story at Nazareth, Luke says '*Do here in Your home town as much as we have heard You did in Capernaum*' (4:23), which implies that Jesus had done previous work in Capernaum! This comment came in yesterday's reading, but we will deal with the general theme of the beginning of Jesus' ministry because this is also affected by the incident in the synagogue at Capernaum.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus' ministry commences in Capernaum (Mark 1:16-28) with the calling of Peter, James and John and the exact same story of the man at the synagogue as we have just read today in Luke! Matthew remarks that Jesus left Nazareth for Capernaum (4:12) before beginning his ministry of preaching (4:17), and teaching (the Sermon on the Mount – Matthew 5-7). The Gospel of John begins entirely differently, with Jesus going from the Jordan to Cana in Galilee (2:1f.) a town near Nazareth, and then moving promptly to Capernaum (2:12). If it were not for the remark by Luke about 'works' in Capernaum, we could conclude that we have virtual agreement about the opening sequence of Jesus' ministry, but with each Gospel giving different emphases. Our hope for agreement on this is broken somewhat by the fact that part of the incident at the Synagogue in Nazareth is recorded by Matthew later in his Gospel (13:54) and also later in Mark (6:1-6), including in each case the famous comment of Jesus about prophets being unacceptable in their home towns.

Why does this matter? It matters because of the great desire of countless Christians over many years to try and understand the sequence of Jesus' ministry, not just to be pedantic, but to try and understand why His ministry evolved in the way that it did. My own way of resolving the various conflicts presented by the facts is this. I reckon that the broad scheme of Jesus' route is clear; from the Jordan back to the region of Nazareth and then to Capernaum; this is helped by the inclusion of the incident at the synagogue in Capernaum

(today's passage) towards the beginning of the ministry of Jesus in three of the Gospels (Luke 4:31-37, Matthew 7:28-9, Mark 1:21-28).

I then suggest that Jesus then visited Nazareth at other times in His ministry, each time experiencing altercations with family and past neighbours, and reinforcing the essential point that He was not welcome (Luke 4:24, Mark 6:4, and Matt. 13:57). The difficulty posed about his possible previous visits and work at Capernaum (Luke 4:23) may be simply the result of Jesus having had prior contact with this area of Galilee. We simply do not know to what Luke may have referred.

Does 'having a demon' have any real meaning today?

Our answer to this question will depend upon how we think the world is affected by good and evil. The Biblical picture says the world is of a fallen place (Genesis 3) in which evil holds sway and Satan holds authority, and this is expressed in different ways. We have already seen that in the temptations of Jesus the devil (Satan) offers Jesus the whole world if He will but worship him (4:6); so clearly, the devil regards the world as His kingdom (see also Matt 4:1f., John 12:31, 14:30, etc). This gives rise to the great New Testament theme of the establishment of God's Kingdom in the world through Christ; as John puts it; Jesus '*has come to destroy all the works of the evil one*' (1 John 3:8).

Evil plays out at every level of life, including the personal, and where evil tempts or afflicts people personally, they may sin. In more difficult circumstances, the New Testament talks of people who are taken over by evil 'spirits' or 'demons', whose presence holds the individual captive, such as the individual described in our story. This passage and other stories of Jesus tell of demons speaking through the individuals in whom they have taken up residence, as well as affecting them in health and character. The New Testament picture is one of complete abhorrence at demons and utter sympathy for the individual whose life has been blighted, with no thought of explanation or blame attached to why such things should be.

Today, our attitude towards this way of understanding evil, is affected by two things. Firstly, due to medical advances, much of what is described in the Bible as the result of demon possession is now regarded as treatable disease (such as epilepsy). Secondly, the church has a poor history of handling the matter of demons and evil; indeed, you could say that the devil has created such an illusion of himself that even church people will not even talk of him. This is one of Satan's strategies to help prevent God's people from perceiving the true nature of evil today.

Our passage today describes a man who possessed by an evil demon being set free from bondage. We should not presume to know any more about his condition, because in his day and in his time, this poor soul was used by the devil to try and attack Jesus, whatever the nature of his 'real' condition in medical terms today. We must accept in awe that the result of this meeting was the eviction of the demon and freeing of the man, and also, what happened did not cause him injury (4:35).

What was the nature of the confrontation between Jesus and the demon?

Rabbis and teachers had authority to interpret Scriptures and apply it to life, but most were extremely cautious about saying anything radically 'new'. They were also empowered to deal with evil spirits not with a form of exorcism as might think of it, but through prayer and claiming the promises of God; a typically Jewish thing to do. So when Jesus taught at the synagogue at Capernaum, where He was without the evil suspicions and gossip of His home town, He did little different from what was expected of any rabbi. The difference was that Jesus taught with authority, with people commenting upon His 'message' (see study notes for verse 32 – see also verse 36).

It was also expected that in the Messianic age (when the Messiah came), evil would be crushed and defeated. Rabbinic sayings suggested that evil spirits would 'speak out' the sovereign power of God, and that the mission of the Messiah would be to destroy all evil and tear down the kingdoms of Satan (see 6:33 and 2 Peter 2:4). Certainly, if these things were common knowledge then, the people who witnessed the confrontation between the demon and Jesus would have immediately assumed that God was about to work in power, through Jesus!

The confrontation itself also reflects these themes. When Jesus spoke in the Temple, the demon shouted out, as if in pain, and said 'what do you want with us ...' (4:34). We see demons saying similar things in a number of stories of deliverance (Matthew 8:28, Luke 5:28); it is like an empty threat, 'don't meddle with us', when we know that this is exactly what is happening! The demon goes on to speak out the name of his opponent twice, 'Jesus of Nazareth ... the Holy One of God!' (4:34) In primitive belief, it was thought that to know the name of someone demonstrated power over them, so this is the reason why Jesus commanded 'Silence' (4:35) before evicting the demon.

Jesus then cast out the demon with a simple command. In this way, the confrontation between the demon and Jesus was concluded, without any concession on Jesus' part to the evil that found its way into the midst of the synagogue. There was no extended ministry or further discussion, for this would only give the demon

more influence in the situation than was his due, and Jesus was able to handle the situation in such a way that the man was uninjured. Those present were able to appreciate the nature of this Messianic power and authority, 'He gives orders to evil spirits ... and they come out!' (4:36), they said.

Application

Confronting evil in every form is part of the work of establishing the Kingdom of God. The church is called to do this in every way that Jesus did, and although there are many other things He did from which we can learn, this passage of Scripture describes the particular act of the deliverance of a demon. There are grave concerns today amongst many church people about what they know of such practice, and their concerns are often justified, especially where deliverance has been handled behind closed doors, and people have been unable to gain a good understanding of what has happened and why. Some find it easier to dismiss the modern practices of deliverance ministry and place their hopes in modern medicine, than engage with what appears to be an activity on the fringes of 'healing ministry'.

Nevertheless, whatever our understanding of the human psyche and medical science, the Christian deliverance ministry seeks to follow in Jesus' footsteps to set people free from Satan's bondage and release them from any associated medical or physiological condition. Over recent decades despite some unhelpful problem, some have sought to find godly means of applying this ministry to real situations in which people believe themselves to be afflicted by the bondage of demons. For example, some people come to the personal conclusion that they are afflicted by demons because of their inability to deal with certain personal difficulties, they feel 'bound', and do not understand why. Of course, demonic bondage takes an enormously large number of forms, and reach this conclusion only after much agonising and help from others. Such people deserve the help of properly informed deliverance ministry practiced under the authority of the whole church. It is possible.

This issue must surely be discussed extensively after reading today's text, but this should not blind us to God's wider picture as found in Luke 4 as a whole. Jesus made it clear at the beginning of His ministry that He would truck no nonsense with evil, not just in dealing with personal temptations (4:1-13), but in the public practice of His ministry. In addition, when Jesus successfully defeated the devil in this small 'pitched spiritual battle', it had the effect of making people believe that God was at work in their midst. The same can be true if we practice an honest and open deliverance ministry in the church today.

We should not forget the reason why Jesus came into the world. He came to deliver all of us from evil so that through repentance and the forgiveness of our sins, we may be saved by faith and find our peace with God in eternity. None of this is abstract, least of all the defeat of evil, so we should take the matter of the defeat of evil seriously; Jesus did it for us, and it is our duty to do it for others too, in Jesus' name.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How might we react to someone who behaves like the possessed man, if he were to speak up in church today? Would our ministry be effective?
2. What does this passage teach us about the authority of Jesus and His ministry in the world today?
3. Does it mean anything to people in the world to talk about evil spirits and demons, and evicting them?

Topics covered by this text

- *The authority of Jesus Christ*
- *The beginning of Jesus' ministry in Capernaum*
- *Deliverance ministry*
- *The effective compassionate ministry of the Gospel.*

Personal comments by author

For many years, the Lord has led me to operate what some people call 'deliverance ministry'. I do not mind the title, but I find people's presumptions about it unhelpful. The aim is to create peace in the individual and the Kingdom of God, not make for trouble and create distress in the church! I have long wished that matters to do with practical deliverance and healing ministry be discussed openly within the church, because it is

damaging to the fellowship of the church if people go away to special centres to receive healing that should be available to them in their own church. There are indeed specialist needs that require some to go to specialist counsellors, but all God's people should seek to establish the Kingdom of God in the face of opposition, and this opposition needs to be better understood!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *You will have your own reactions to the subject of deliverance ministry, and you will probably feel strongly about your convictions. Look at this passage carefully and study its place in Luke's Gospel, and ask yourself whether your own understanding of deliverance ministry is helpful, or does it help or hinder your greater understanding of the work of Jesus Christ in the world?*
- *Talk with a friend about how the church can be more effective in dealing with the evils evident within the world today. Speak about this from whatever angle you wish, personal, local, national or international.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You commanded such authority, the demons trembled! May they tremble when they hear that God's people the church are fighting them! May they run away from in front of us and scurry away when we call, and may God be praised in every act of deliverance we perform, to His glory! AMEN
