

Reading: Mark 1:21-29

*Please God,
open the Bible to us in a fresh and exciting way,
In Jesus name we ask it.*

We are seated in the synagogue in Capernaum on the Sabbath. We watch Jesus enter with four local fishermen who are pretty rough round the edges. Jesus reads from the Jewish scriptures and then he starts to preach. But there is something different about this rabbi. We are used to the scribes teaching. Their teaching is layered on top of tradition and, to be honest, we have heard it all before. But this teaching is new. It's not built on traditional teaching and yet it is. It's so fresh and yet so ancient, so authoritative and persuasive. It's almost as if we are listening to God himself. Then there comes a shrill cry from the back, a man possessed by an evil spirit. We watch as Jesus calmly silences and expels the unclean spirit. We marvel at his effortless authority over the forces of evil. And we notice the hatred on the scribes faces because Jesus has healed on the Sabbath.

In Jesus' world and for Mark the Gospel writer, demons were real, and a Messiah who left the forces of evil unchallenged would be of little interest. There is no area of life which falls outside of Jesus' authority, there is no problem people have from which he cannot rescue them.

But for us listening to our Gospel today, we listen but we find it hard to understand. We don't fully believe in demons. And we find it hard to imagine Jesus having power over them. If someone has demons today, we would probably class them as mentally ill and medicate them.

We have moved on from demons and we have moved on from Jesus' power over them. In short, we have become too cool for Sunday School.

On Thursday I spent some time with a friend. I was privileged to hear some of his stories. He told me about his demon. By age 12 his addictions ruled his every waking moment, gambling, and the pokies. By 15 he was playing the pokies every day. He didn't think about anything else, the only excitement in his life was playing them. By 17 he was working in retail and stealing from the till to pay for his addiction. His boss found out and fired him. So, he simply got more creative to fuel his addiction. By age 21, he would blow all his wages on the pokies. He would promise his wife that it wouldn't happen again and then do the same thing next week. To make up for it he promised to take her to the movies. On the way to the movies, he spent the movie money on the pokies. He went to the toilet in the pub. What happened next astonished him. Coming from a non-religious background God had never been on his radar. In his head he heard a voice, the voice of God, "Are you done yet?" it said. But he didn't want to let go. "Maybe I can fix this myself," he thought to

himself. He didn't want to give up authority to God over his life. But knowing it was God - because he had seen movies of religious people, he knelt on the floor of the toilets. "I'm done," he said. God showed him a vision of a car wreck. He knew at once this car wreck was his life. Alongside the wreck was a loving father not judging him but there to help him.

The next day, out of the blue, he met a man who invited him to a recovery group. He joined and over the next 12 months went through the 12-step programme. There was lots of talk about God in the group. In his own words he felt 'set free'. But that isn't the end of the story because after 12 months the question was set free to do what? He only knew one person who went to church, so he asked her to take him. It was there he discovered what he had been set free for. He had been set free to help others with their addictions.

Today you will find Andrew working as a chaplain at our local racetracks, helping others like him. He and his wife are the Salvation Army captains of the Belfast church. He gave me permission to share his demon and God's miraculous transformation of his life.

I wonder if you know someone like Andrew who has demons too. The demons in our modern world go by different names. Addictions, abuse, exploitation, oppression are some of the names of the demons in our world.

I wonder if you have areas of your life that need God to bring healing in? I know I do. Are we honest enough to name our need for God? Are we brave enough, like Andrew, to let go and let God.

God wants to set us free too. And God's love knows no bounds.

Let us pray:

God of freedom, you want us to have abundant and fulfilling lives and you long to set us free from all that holds us back. Be with us today as you were in that synagogue long ago. We acknowledge our need for healing and your loving presence to help us. We are done trying to overcome our difficulties on our own and ask you to help us. Gently and in your good time set us free from all that holds us back. Set us free like Andrew, to help others.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.