

Followers of the Way

Manifesting the Kingdom

Philip Quenby, 11-09-22

Mark 1:21-39

Even before the death of the Queen, many were seeing this as the start of a new spiritual season, in which the systems of this world – already tottering after the shakings of recent years – will start to fail. The wind of the Spirit is blowing afresh in this nation, exposing things done in the dark, challenging the Church to reject the lukewarmness that's characterised us too often, confronting evil in all its manifestations. It's a wind of holiness and a wind of power, and it will bring about the coming together of Word and Spirit. Smith Wigglesworth spoke of shortly before he died. These are days of crisis and glory. The crisis will be extreme, with famines and wars and hardships of a kind we'd imagined were in our past. But the glory will be greater, with the LORD gathering multitudes into His kingdom.

If God's people are to stand firm in the coming days – and not just stand firm, but be able to contend for the faith and to prevail – our focus needs to be on Jesus, instead of on the tempest raging around us. Twice the Scriptures speak of the twelve disciples finding themselves with Jesus, exposed to a life-threatening storm on Lake Galilee. The first time, in answer to the pleas of His frightened followers, Jesus simply calmed the storm (Mark 4:35-41). On the second occasion, the wind died down, but not before Peter climbed out of the boat and tried to walk across the water of the lake as he saw his master doing (Matthew 14:22-23). We're in that kind of situation, when we'll need to get out of the boat and do the seemingly impossible in the midst of a raging gale. We'll only be able to do this if we keep our eyes fixed firmly on the Lord. Mountain climbers are always told not to look down. Do that, and instead of concentrating on reaching the summit, fear of falling will take over. Doubt will be our undoing, just as it was for Peter. He "walked on the water and came towards Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. 'You of little faith.' He said, 'why did you doubt?'" (Matthew 14:29-30).

We need to guard against doubt and its close relative, fear. In the physical realm, fear can be healthy or, at any rate, necessary in a fallen world, designed to spark fight or flight. But spiritually, things are otherwise, since "God did not give us a spirit of fear, but of power, love and self-control." (2 Timothy 1:7). Spiritually, fear (F-E-A-R) is always unhealthy – **False Evidence Appearing Real**. What put doubt in Peter's mind wasn't even anything tangible. It was the wind. Of course, the effects created by the wind would've been spectacular: mountainous seas and much sound and fury. But they were effects, like we speak of the special effects in a film. The amazing, incontrovertible truth was that (till doubt took over) Peter walked on water. While He still trod this earth, Jesus said, "anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than

these” (John 14:12). Faith is the opposite of doubt. Faith is the superpower that enables God to perform His miracles through weak and sinful creatures like you and me. We’re being called now to make a step change of faith to prepare us for the greater works Jesus talked about. More than ever, our focus must be on Him.

With that in mind, we’re going to spend the next several weeks looking at Mark’s Gospel. It’s a great Scripture to root ourselves in because of what it says, how it says it, who it was written for, and who it was written by. It’s the shortest of the Gospels, characterised by quick-fire action. Whilst Matthew has Jesus’ sermons as its outstanding feature, Luke His parables, and John His teachings, for Mark it’s His miracles. It’s an intensely practical telling of events from Jesus’ earthly ministry, designed almost certainly for a Roman audience (a very practical, no-nonsense people). Tradition says it was written by John Mark, drawing on the sermons and recollections of the apostle Peter. It’s Mark who tells us, “[The] Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45). And, in addition to the encouragements that come from the words of the Gospel itself – God’s rescue plan revealed – there’s encouragement from the life of the man who penned it, since John Mark’s story is of failure redeemed. He was the one who deserted Paul and Barnabas during their first missionary journey (Acts 13:13). But though Paul refused to take him on his next mission, Mark eventually regained his confidence, so that Paul wrote to Timothy, “Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.” (2 Timothy 4:11). This is something we all need to take to heart. Failure in the past doesn’t condemn us to failure in the future. No matter how much or how often we’ve made a mess of it before, God can still use us mightily. The more we can put doubt and fear to one side, the greater our focus on Him, the more we allow Him to do precisely that.

With all that by way of background, let’s get into today’s text. It shows three essentials of Jesus’ earthly ministry, and consequently provides a model for what we should be doing as His followers: casting out demons, healing the sick and preaching the Gospel. This is what manifesting the kingdom looks like, and it’s what we’re called to do. So, let’s take a look at each of these things in turn.

The action takes place in Capernaum, a town on the west side of the Sea of Galilee. The Bible tells us that “When Jesus heard that John [the Baptist] had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake” (Matthew 4:12-13). This was where He met five of His future disciples, the fishermen James, John, Peter and Andrew (Mark 1:16-20), and later the tax collector Matthew, also called Levi (Mark 2:13-17). Jesus was a religiously observant Jew. While He was still living in Nazareth, we’re told that “on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom.” (Luke 4:16) and there He read from the Torah scroll (Matthew 4:17-21) a passage from Isaiah 61:1-2 that prophesied about Him. Now, in Capernaum, He “went into the synagogue and began to teach.” (Mark 4:21). If a popular preacher or Rabbi was visiting a town, it was quite usual for the chief ruler of a synagogue to invite this person to officiate and preach at the Sabbath service, and presumably that’s what happened on this occasion.

The Scripture highlights two things about Jesus' preaching. First, "people were amazed at [it], because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law." (Mark 4:22). I suspect this is only partly a comment on the *manner* of his teaching. Yes, it was about that, since He didn't follow the accepted prescription of trying to justify every proposition using a precedent drawn from one of the great teachers of the past. But it's also about the *message* He drew from the Bible text. There was a freshness about it that the people had never heard before. Jesus the living Word of God brought the Word alive for the people. Which leads on to the second thing, which was the *power* in His preaching. It caused "a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit [to cry] out, '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!'" (Mark 1:23-24). There's power in the preaching of the Word: "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joint and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12).

We need to pause there to take stock of things. For all we know, the man with a demon had sat in that self-same synagogue week in, week out for year after year without the satanic manifesting itself. If it had manifested, we'd expect the man who was possessed wouldn't have been allowed back into this synagogue! But the demon had evidently felt no need to show itself, and presumably that was because it hadn't heard anything that would cause it to. The preaching was dry as dry could be, and demons can listen to dry preaching all day longer without so much as a whimper. But when Jesus came and the true Word of God was spoken, what a kerfuffle there was then! Which should lead us to ask some questions: in how many churches up and down this land today does the demonic sit quite contentedly since it never hears anything to disquiet it? If that's the case, what's the step change of faith needed to see us lay aside doubt and fear and start to proclaim the Word of God with the same authority, the same freshness and the same power as it was proclaimed by our Lord? And when that's done, will we be expectant of witnessing the Word have the effect the Bible tells us it has, and then be prepared to respond to circumstances as God leads?

The true preaching of the Word will invite opposition. Speak biblical truth in any setting today and the likelihood is, we'll face a push-back. Jesus' encounter with the man in the synagogue wasn't a one-off, since demon possession was commonplace: "That [same] evening after sunset the people brought to [him] all the sick and demon-possessed ... He ... drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was." (Mark 1:32 and 34). And as in his day, so in ours. The task for believers hasn't changed in the intervening centuries. When Jesus sent out the twelve, he told them, "As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give." (Matthew 10:7-8). The preaching of the Word, with signs and wonders following: it's the age-old prescription to see salvation brought to many and the kingdom of God advanced forcefully. The clash of kingdoms is becoming more and more evident, and the battle is only going to intensify. The kingdom of heaven is near (Matthew 10:7) for those who are not yet saved, and "the kingdom of heaven is within [us]" (Luke 17:21) who are, meaning we're on the front line of this battle, whether we like it or not.

Evil has often been given too much of a free ride in recent years because Christians haven't done what they're supposed to be doing. (Some have, of course, and contended valiantly for the faith, but this is a comment about believers in the West in general.) We need to shift away from our entirely natural and understandable fear of opposition or confrontation towards looking on Jesus. He didn't hold back when it was necessary: "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. 'Come out of him!' The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek." (Mark 1:25-26). The people who witnessed this remarked among themselves, "He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." (Mark 1:27). By the work of the Holy Spirit in us and through us, that self-same power and authority of Jesus is available to all who acknowledge Him as Lord and Saviour. It's a power given to us in order that we might use it, and it's time for us to start doing so like never before.

It's a power to expose and confront evil, and also power for healing. While Jesus was in Capernaum, "The whole town gathered at the door [of where He was staying and He] healed many who had various diseases." (Mark 1:33-34). We rejoice whenever there's physical healing. It was His compassion (Mark 4:41) in the face of human suffering that moved Jesus again and again to heal. We pray each week for healing of those we know who are afflicted in body, mind or spirit. But those who are healed bodily will still die in the end, because we all do. From God's point of view, physical healing is always intended as a precursor to spiritual healing. Physical healing isn't an end in itself. In this life, it's so that those who've been healed will be fitted for works of service. That's how it was with Peter's mother-in-law, "in bed with a fever ... So Jesus went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her *and she began to wait on them.*" (Mark 1:29-31, emphasis added). But healing also looks beyond this life to the next, and the greater healing that leads to our salvation. Ultimately, there's no point seeing people healed physically unless they're also healed spiritually. Just as there's no point seeing someone delivered of demons without the vacated space being filled by Christ. Because, as Jesus says, "When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first." (Matthew 12:43-45, Luke 11:24-26). Those who are delivered and healed need to be brought into the kingdom and then discipled.

It's no accident this passage concerning Jesus' first stay in Capernaum starts with preaching the Word and ends with preaching the Word, since that's a key component of making disciples. There's a great deal more to it than that, of course – a living together, a walking together, a building of trust and the imparting of character – but it has to be rooted in the Word. It's time we once again took the Word of God seriously. We need to stop over-thinking it and trying to second-guess it, adding to it and taking away from it. This side of heaven, there'll always be things we can't fully understand or work out. We just have to accept it and get on with the job in hand. If our focus is properly on Jesus, we'll take Him at His word: if He says it, that enough should be good for us. And with the right focus has to go right attitude and right motivation.

Realising Jesus, who'd gone to a solitary place to pray, was missing, "Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: 'Everyone

is looking for you!” (Mark 1:36-37). We might legitimately question, though, whether these people were really looking for Jesus or for what they thought they could get out of Him: this wonder-worker who’d brought relief from their sickness and pain, and delivered them from torment by demons, this wandering rabbi who’d given them more entertainment in the previous twenty-four hours than they’d had in a lifetime up till then. Because later, the Messiah had harsh words for Capernaum: “Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. ‘Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.’” (Matthew 11:20-24, Luke 10:13-15).

Capernaum had its chance, and fluffed it. In response to the disciples telling him everyone was looking for him, “Jesus replied, ‘Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.’ So he travelled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.” (Mark 1:38-39).

The Queen’s death draws a line under the things that went before. It marks the end of an era. This is a new dawn, and what was just about adequate in the past won’t cut the mustard for the things we’re being asked to do in the present. We’re about to be given the chance of a lifetime, and we mustn’t fluff it. Our job description is exactly the same as the one given to the disciples: to “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.” (Matthew 10:8). And, of course, to preach the Gospel – if necessary, using words! When people see the power of God at work, they’ll understand what we mean by saying, “The kingdom of heaven is near.” (Matthew 10:7). Everything people have looked to for earthly “salvation” – every individual, every institution, every system, every ideology – is progressively being stripped away. This is the time to tell them about the One who never fails. He never has, and He never will. Our ability to tell of Him and walk in His power will be in direct proportion to our closeness to Him, our degree of trust in Him and the extent of our focus on Him. His call to us today is to take our eyes off the wind and the waves and to gaze on Him, who is our source of calm in every storm, our safe haven in a turbulent sea and the ultimate goal of our passage through this life. “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified of [what lies ahead] for the LORD your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you.” (Deuteronomy 31:6). If we place our hands in His, we can know with certainty that He won’t ever let us down.

As a well-loved hymn puts it: “Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His beautiful face, and the things of this world will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.” To Him be the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.