

## CALL TO WORSHIP:

*I will extol the LORD with all my heart  
in the council of the upright and in the assembly.  
Great are the works of the LORD;  
they are pondered by all who delight in them.  
Glorious and majestic are his deeds,  
and his righteousness endures for ever!*  
Let us worship God.

(Psalm 111.1-3)

## PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Almighty, eternal, and loving God:

As we begin our service this morning, we turn our attention toward you; and in doing so, we venture into your presence. We thank you that you not only allow us into your presence, but that you actually invite us. We come to celebrate your love for us, and to renew our commitment to loving you and living in your ways.

Having come into your presence, though, we realize how we have been untrue to you, and unloving toward our fellow human beings. We are constantly tempted to look for our own way and serve our own desires. And, whenever we do so, we devalue our relationship with you and with the people around us, even those closest to us.

Merciful God: We ask for your forgiveness, then; and we ask you, through the work of the Holy Spirit, to help us change our ways. Enable us to live as genuine daughters and sons of yours; and grant that, through healthy relationships with you and each other, we may experience the peace, joy, and abundant life that you offer us through the death and resurrection of Jesus, our Savior.

We pray in his name, and we pray together, now, as he taught us:

*Our Father, which art in heaven:  
Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come.  
Thy will be done in earth,  
as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil;  
for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,  
for ever. Amen.*

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

## ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*If we say we have no sin,  
we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.  
But if we confess our sin,  
God, who is faithful and just,  
will forgive our sin,  
and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

(1 John 1.8-9)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely,  
let us be assured that God will forgive us.

## SCRIPTURE READINGS:

- **Old Testament Reading:** Deuteronomy 18.14-22 - A prophet like Moses

The book of Deuteronomy is Moses' farewell address to the people of Israel, before he dies, and before they finally enter the Promised Land.

In this reading, Moses tells the people that God will send them a prophet like himself, through whom God will speak to them and guide them.

- **Psalm:** Psalm 111 - "I will extol the LORD with all my heart".

Psalm 111 is a psalm of praise, which celebrates the things that God has done for his people.

- **Letter Reading:** 1 Corinthians 8 (.1-13) - "Food sacrificed to idols"

In this reading, Paul begins a discussion of the question as to whether or not it's all right for Christians to eat meat that had previously been offered in sacrifice to pagan gods — or as Paul calls it, "food offered to idols".

As the opening words of the reading show, Paul is replying to a question that the Corinthians have asked him on this subject.

- **Gospel Reading:** Mark 1.21-28 - Jesus speaks in a synagogue

This reading comes directly after last week's reading, in which Jesus began his ministry.

In today's reading, Jesus teaches in a synagogue, and heals a man possessed by an unclean spirit.

## SERMON: "Powerful Words"

Today's Gospel reading picks up from where last week's reading left off. It is early days in Jesus' ministry. Last week's reading told us that Jesus began his ministry after John the Baptist had been put into prison. He went into the region of Galilee, "proclaiming the good news of God", Mark says (Mark 1.14). He then recruited four fishermen — two pairs of brothers — to accompany him. In due course, those four would become the nucleus of a larger group of twelve disciples.

And then we come to today's story. It's the first story in Mark in which we see Jesus speaking to an audience and doing a miraculous healing. In it, Jesus and his four followers — Simon, Andrew, James, and John — attend a synagogue service on a Sabbath day — a Saturday, that is — and Jesus speaks to the congregation as a guest speaker — a visiting rabbi. The place is a town called Capernaum, which was on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, some thirty kilometers from Jesus' hometown of Nazareth. Presumably, Jesus wasn't well known, yet; not in Capernaum, anyway.

Mark doesn't tell us what Jesus said in that service, but whatever it was, it made a big impression on the congregation. *The people were amazed at his teaching, Mark says, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law* (Mark 1.22). Considering who Jesus is, that shouldn't be surprising, because as the Son of God, he would have spoken with greater authority than any other rabbi; with greater authority than a prophet, even. He would have spoken with the full authority of God himself. He wouldn't have spoken about things he believed, but rather about things he knew. He wouldn't have based his teaching on the teachings of past generations of rabbis, but on his own infinite knowledge and experience. Of course, no one in the congregation knew that Jesus was the Son of God; that was a fact that he kept a tightly-held secret, especially here in the Gospel of Mark. In any case, whatever his words to the congregation were that day, they were powerful.

Then something else happened that made an even greater impression on the congregation — the way Jesus dealt with a man who suddenly interrupted him, yelling, *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!* (1.24). Mark tells us that the man *was possessed by an unclean spirit* (1.23).

With the skimpy information Mark gives us, it's hard to know what was wrong with the man. To us 21st-Century people, it sounds as if he may have had a “mental health issue”, as we say today. Physical diseases, disabilities, and mental illnesses weren't as well understood in those days as they are today; and so it was common for people to attribute them to “evil spirits” or “demons”, especially if they led to bizarre or anti-social behavior. While *we* come up with *natural* explanations for such afflictions, First-Century people came up with *supernatural* explanations.

Besides this one thing, though, Mark doesn't tell us anything else about this man. Was he a member of the congregation, or had he come in off the street? Was this a one-time occurrence, or did he regularly have outbursts like this? Were the others in the congregation concerned about him, or were they afraid of him? Mark doesn't say.

What Mark does say is what Jesus did in response to this outburst. He could've ignored the man, but he didn't. He could've asked a couple of big guys in the congregation to escort the man out, but he didn't do that, either. Instead, accepting the belief that the man was possessed by some kind of hostile spirit, he simply commanded the spirit to leave the man alone. *Be quiet*, he ordered. *Come out of him* (1.25). No ceremony, no incantation; just a simple, straightforward command. And the spirit obeyed — although apparently, with protest. Mark says, *The unclean*

*spirit shook the man violently, and came out of him with a shriek* (1.26).

Unfortunately, Mark doesn't say anything more about the man. Presumably, he was healed of his affliction, whatever it was, from that point on. He was liberated from whatever force it was that had burdened him. Presumably, he was then able to take his rightful place in the community, no longer being seen as a person who had something wrong with him.

Rather, Mark focuses his attention on the reaction of the congregation. They were already impressed with Jesus' teaching; now, having witnessed that they just have, they're doubly impressed. *What is this?* they ask each other. *A new teaching — and with authority! He even gives orders to unclean spirits, and they obey him!* (1.27).

“Authority” — that's the key word in this passage. The people in the synagogue recognized and marveled at Jesus' authority — the authority in his teaching, and the authority he demonstrated in healing the man who had disrupted the service. The exorcism or healing — however we prefer to see it — demonstrated that Jesus' authority was backed up by considerable power. Jesus was someone who couldn't be taken lightly. For the next few chapters in Mark's Gospel, people will keep asking “Who *is* this?”, because they recognize that Jesus' authority and power show that he's no ordinary person.

It's important to see the connection between this incident and the summary of Jesus' *message* that Mark gave us in *last* Sunday's Gospel reading. In last week's reading, Mark summarized Jesus' message in three short sentences: *The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent, and believe the good news!* (Mark 1.15). The healing or exorcism in today's reading serves as an illustration of what Jesus *meant* in saying “The kingdom of God has come near”. In Mark's Gospel — and in Matthew and Luke as well — Jesus' miracles of healing are seen as instances in which the power of the kingdom of God exerted itself in order to set things right in people's lives — to push back against forces that oppressed, demeaned, and disabled human beings; and to bring about healing, liberation, and restoration. That day, the synagogue congregation was given a demonstration of what it means to say “The kingdom of God has come near”. That day, a man with some kind of affliction experienced the liberating and life-giving *power* of the kingdom of God in his own life.

In this way, then, Jesus' verbal message and his acts of healing were closely linked. His miracles of healing were actions that authenticated his message about the kingdom of God having “come near”. Indeed, his miracles of healing served as a preview of what life will be like when God establishes his kingdom in the world in all its fullness. His miracles of healing served as a preview *also* of the much greater miracle that would happen in his own life later on — his resurrection from death.

In that modest synagogue in the town of Capernaum, then, a significant showdown took place that day — a showdown in a much larger struggle between God and the forces that distort, diminish, and oppress God's creation. That struggle is not yet over, of course; it continues to this day. The pandemic that we're living through at the moment also is a manifestation of that

struggle. So is the fact that there are people who struggle each day to find food and shelter while there are others who have way more than they need. So is the fact that people are mistreated, taken advantage of, and denied opportunities just because of their race, ethnic background, or religion. So is the fact that people are constantly being misled by lies and half-truths.

As followers of Jesus in our own day, we're caught up in that struggle ourselves. Let's make sure we're on the right side, then — the side that works to promote truth, fairness, kindness, health, and life. Let us find encouragement in the outcome of the showdown that took place in that synagogue in Capernaum all those centuries ago — and especially in the outcome of the much greater showdown that began with Jesus' suffering on the cross, and ended with his resurrection.

Unfortunately, we human beings don't have the power to win this struggle against the forces of evil on our own, as history clearly shows us. Only God has that power, and scripture assures us that God eventually will win this struggle. Let us stick with God in this struggle, then; and let us be confident that God will be victorious in the end. Let us continue to be inspired by Jesus, who spoke and acted with such authority in that synagogue in Capernaum long ago.

### **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE** *[by Charlie Clifford]*

Heavenly Father, we extol You for Your great power towards us who believe — Your tremendous, invincible power that works in us and for us ... the same almighty strength You used when You raised Jesus from the dead, and seated Him far above all other powers, visible and invisible. You are able to do infinitely beyond all our highest prayers or thoughts. Nothing is impossible with You! Thank You that when we praise You and bring our requests to You in simple faith, we plug into Your almighty power ... that when we offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving, we open the door for You to rescue us and bless our lives, and we prepare the way for You to rescue and bless other people, near and far. "So great are Your powers that Your enemies cringe before You." We lift our praise to You, for no human imagination can take in the startling revolutionary power, softly, subtly but with irresistible sweep, that flows down from the Crowned Christ among grateful men and women ... that flows through the lives of individuals wholly under the gracious influence of the Holy Spirit ... through people who simply live in full-faced touch with Christ, and who take that power as the need arises and the sovereign Holy Spirit leads. Thank You that we are a part of a vast army of people around the world — people who love in full-faced touch with Your Son, and move Your mighty hand to bring about Your gracious purposes. Thank You that our influence and our victories are not by human might or power, but by Your Spirit.

Heavenly Father, You have said that the plans in a human's hearts are many, but it is Your purpose that prevails. We ask You to fulfil Your Word, and make Your purpose reign in our lives. We all have plans and goals that we are pursuing. We ask You to establish whatever is from You — whatever is in line with Your purpose — and cause to fade away whatever is not from You. We honour You as our Creator and as our loving heavenly Father. We affirm that it

is You who work in us to will and to act according to Your good purpose. Renew our minds so we may understand Your ways and Your plans more fully. For we know that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Gracious God, eternal Father, Maker and master of all things, we praise You that with endless bounty You have made provision for every need experienced by Your children. We rejoice as we contemplate the truth that not one solitary need among us today finds You indifferent or helpless, or catches You by surprise. No one but our God could say: “Before you call I will answer.” We are staggered by such divine munificence. Help us to really believe that You know, You care, and You will answer. Now in this moment, all who are joined in prayer with a heavy burden are going to leave it with You. O Lord, we praise You for a faith that teaches us to sing, to pray, and to hope. To sing as others from past households of faith honoured God while facing overwhelming circumstances. They sang of the wonderful goodness of the Lord. Moses, Deborah, David, and Mary teach us to sing — when we're being tested; to sing — when sorrow has us in its grip; to sing — when we don't feel like it; to sing — a new song when we pass through a crisis; when we've had a fresh experience of God's provision; when we've been given songs in the night. Someday we shall join Moses and the host of heaven in singing; “Great and marvellous are Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways.”

We praise You for faith that teaches us to pray. Not endless repetitions, not mindless mantras, not magical incantations, not with ringing of bells and clapping of hands, nor in a catatonic stupor. Rather, as a redeemed soul in fellowship with the Redeemer. So, like the disciples, we say, Lord, teach us to pray. We praise You for a faith that teaches us to hope. Hope is our anchor in the storms and stresses of life. We hope in God. We have a blessed hope. We have the confident hope of heaven. Your promises, Father God, are sure and reliable — that gives us hope.

We are at this time, seeking You, Lord. We are looking in Your Word for courage and strength. Help us to have more confidence in You. You are our rock and our refuge. Bring us up to where You are. We want to commune with You, to rest with You, to be head over heels “in trust” with You. Show us how to do that, Lord. As we look up on Your face, deliver us from this burden of fear, particularly of the COVID-19 virus. We long to dwell in Your presence here and now. And when we rise from this time of prayer, we long to take You with us through our day. You are our courage and our strength. Nothing can harm us.

Father, we rejoice in You and in the knowledge that the earth is full of Your goodness and loving kindness. We consider and give attentive, continuous care to watching over others, studying how we may stir them up to love, helpful deeds, and noble activities. Thank You Father, that Your goodness flows through us, for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth. You have created us in Christ Jesus unto good works which You have predestined for us to walk in them.

Thanks be to God! He gave us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ, and we are made over-comers by the blood of the Lamb. God of compassion, as You look upon Your children

around the world, many are suffering. We pray that You will deliver the oppressed, encourage the seemingly insignificant, raise the fallen, provide for the needy, heal the sick, and bring back those who have gone astray. Make wars to cease, and every nation come to know that You alone are God, and that Your Son, Jesus Christ, provides plenty of redemption. Today, wherever the gospel is preached, when the Good News is declared, may Your people rejoice, and may many others come to faith.

Father, Paul exhorts us in Timothy to pray “first of all for all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour”. Almighty God, the hearts of our leaders are in Your hands, and we know You are in control. Therefore, we pray that skillful and godly wisdom will enter the hearts of our leaders; if the knowledge of God be pleasant to them. We pray that discretion will watch over them, and understanding keep them; to deliver them from evil ways and from evil men and women — from lying persons who speak perverse things, who forsake the path of righteousness to walk in the ways of darkness. Deliver them from evildoers and terrorists who have come to steal, kill, and destroy.

Merciful God, we are mindful of First Church and Neepawa Church and their congregations. We seek Your guidance and direction in their deliberations. We ask You to meet the needs of each and every one. We thank You for the many blessings we are partakers of each and every day. In silent prayer we bring our special requests to You: \_\_\_\_\_. Lord hear our prayers!

Father, we would ask that You go with us now as we leave this time of worship. Help us to lead lives that will declare the One who brings us joy and peace. Bless us, and make us a blessing to others. For we ask these things in the precious name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

## **COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:**

Brothers and sisters in Christ:

Go into the week ahead

in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,

to continue working with God

in his struggle against the forces of evil in everyday life.

And may God bless you:

May he strengthen, sustain, and encourage you.

in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.