

Prayer

Take control of our lives, Almighty God. Come and speak the words we need to hear, come and draw us near to You in faith and love, come and minister to us Your peace. Then, as we yield our all to You, may we learn to rejoice in the liberty of Your will, and find ourselves complete as people committed to You, our Maker and Redeemer: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: 'New beginnings'

Pray that God will do new things in our midst to refresh our spirits and bring us new life. This week, pray the He will do this for you, for your family and your church, and for the world in which we live.

On-going prayers

- Continue to pray about world tensions over Iran and recent elections
 - Pray about waste disposal, and your own attitude to this issue
 - Give thanks for the gift of music and its use for worship within churches
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Meditation

In a world full of beautiful sights and the marvels of creation,
Save us, good Lord, from blindness and insensitivity:

In a world full of water, air, and natural resources and elements,
Save us, good Lord, from polluting ourselves to death:

In a world full of plants and animals all dependent upon each other,
Save us, good Lord, from brutality and destruction:

In a world full of trees, plants and a enormous array of vegetation,
Save us, good Lord, from exploiting this gift for greed:

In a world full of people with vast potential for creativity and love,
Save us, good Lord, from using others to meet our needs:

In a world full of the evidence of the mighty hand that made it,
Save us, good Lord, from believing it is ours, not Yours.

Bible Study - Mark:21-26

²¹ They went to Capernaum; and as soon as the Sabbath came, He went into the synagogue and taught. ²² The people were amazed at His teaching, for He taught them as someone with authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ Straight away, a man with an unclean spirit was present in their synagogue, and he shouted out, ²⁴ 'What do we have in common, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who You are, the Holy One of God!' ²⁵ Jesus rebuked him and said, 'Silence, come out of him!' ²⁶ The unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions, and came out of him after crying out with a loud voice. ²⁷ The people were all amazed, and asked one another, 'What is this? A new teaching, but with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' ²⁸ News about Him spread immediately throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Review

In this startling and dramatic story, Jesus went into the local synagogue at Capernaum where He was undoubtedly known, to worship God with the congregation and contribute to the worship by speaking from the Scriptures, as any man was entitled to do. Then, as He worshipped, two things happened; firstly, His teaching had such a power and authority that the congregation was astonished (1:22)! Secondly, a man

described as possessed by an 'unclean spirit' had somehow managed to get into the synagogue. He shouted at Jesus, and Jesus not only mastered the whole scene but also cast the demon out of the man. By making him clean Jesus calmed the sensibilities of those present and demonstrated His authority as the Messiah. However, these people had only just come across Jesus and discover that something extraordinary was happening in their midst!

This is the first public incident of Jesus' ministry recorded by Mark, and it is also one of the early stories about Jesus in Luke's Gospel, which can help us fill in some of the gaps in Jesus' ministry left out by Mark. This incident took place at Capernaum (1:21), a short time after Jesus had preached at Nazareth (according to Luke 4:16f.) and astonished people by announcing that the words of the prophet Isaiah; 'the Spirit of the Lord is upon me ...' were being fulfilled in their presence. Mark says that the same astonishment greeted Jesus' preaching and teaching in Capernaum as elsewhere, but he immediately went on to illustrate Jesus' authority over the powers of evil by describing His deliverance ministry (123f.). People often misunderstand this story because they have fixed negative views about the whole subject of possession by spirits, which is a major part of the story.

People today are often very cautious about accepting the theory of any understanding of the nature of evil that includes demons, spirits, Satan or the devil. They tend to reject any interpretation of stories about Jesus suggesting that demonic possession is a reality or that deliverance is a genuine ministry either of Jesus or of His followers today. They perceive the talk of demons as evidence of past ages when people did not know the proper meaning of mental illness. This is unfortunate, for we should at least be prepared to understand what this meant to people in Jesus' day before we jump to our conclusions for today. One thing is very clear; in Jesus, God came to establish a Kingdom in which His goodness would prevail over all evil, and however you describe evil, its purpose is to prevent God's work. The coming of Jesus therefore meant that spiritual war broke out between 'good' and 'evil', and it should therefore come as no surprise to us that one of the first things that happened to Jesus when He began to preach was that He was confronted by an evil spirit.

Most detailed research about Jesus suggests that during His ministry He was a man in His mid to late twenties. In His own time, He would have been considered as a man in His prime; young, and with much potential. In addition, we have some indication from Luke's Gospel (Luke 2:41-52) that Jesus had a commanding knowledge of Jewish Law and tradition from an early age, and it is not surprising that he went up to speak in the synagogue on the Sabbath (1:21). Moreover, the synagogue at Capernaum was likely to have been a place Jesus knew well, and the people present would have known about Him and His prodigious knowledge, and it was against this background that the congregation were awestruck by Jesus' authority! His command of evil spirits was a very different thing to mere knowledge!

As Mark has already recorded, Jesus had been commissioned by God as His 'Messiah'. He had been baptised by the Holy Spirit, and He now had a specific ministry for which He was enabled (1:9-11). The commission of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit made the difference between a knowledgeable young man and the Messiah who had authority over evil spirits. People were both amazed and confused (1:27), but that was only to be expected. Jesus ministry had only just begun!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What is the most amazing thing that Jesus has taught you, and how has this changed you? Discuss this in your group.
2. Is the deliverance ministry a part of the life of your church, and if it is, how is it practised? What is the difference between this and the healing ministry?
3. What are the 3 ways in which we come across evil spirits today, and how can we best deal with them?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

After considering this passage, you may have any number of thoughts in your mind about evil spirits or the Gospel itself. Some of the issues within this passage are controversial. It is a good practice for all of us who aim to walk in the path of Jesus to refuse to let difficult or controversial issues lie unattended. A simple resolution to speak to others or research an issue, for example, will help us grow enormously and show the Lord that we are serious about pursuing what we mean by calling ourselves 'disciples'. The issue of demon possession should not be left alone; it is extremely important for us to find ways of understanding it because

we cannot read the story of Jesus' life and ignore it. Deliverance ministry is a substantial part of Jesus' work; so what does it mean?

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *If the issue of delivering people from demons is one you need to think about more carefully, then read these texts, which are all to do with deliverance ministry (Matt 12:22f. Luke 8:2f. Luke 11:15f.). Pray about what you have read and ask the Lord to reveal Himself to you through these readings.*
- *Pray for the church, that it might fight against evil, and pray against evil yourself, and fight against Satan, who is the enemy of all that is right and true in this world.*

Final Prayer

Holy Lord, God of power and might; raise up people amongst us who will set high standards of spiritual integrity and godliness. May we have leaders to inspire us, and friends who will work with us to build God's Kingdom in our midst; in the name of Jesus Christ our Saviour: AMEN
