**Sunday 28th January**

**The Fourth Sunday**

**after Epiphany**

**The Revd Nicola**

**Furley-Smith**

**Call to Worship**

As Christians living in a broken world, we are aware of the need for healing in our own lives, in the lives of others and in our world. Christ offers us that healing, wholeness and transformation.

So come and praise the God who makes us whole.

Come and hear his life-giving word.

Come you who have an awareness of the need for transformation.

As we gather to worship in God's name: may the Lord be with us. Amen.

**Prayer of Approach & Confession (based on Psalm 111)**

O God of life,

with our whole hearts, we praise you.
We lift up our voices in praise

as people who gather to sing and proclaim,
as people who gather to remember your redeeming love,
as people who gather to hear of your faithfulness and your grace.

All glory belongs to you, God.

As we come to you in worship and praise:
**we will give thanks to you with our whole heart.**

As we hear and receive your Word of Life:
**we will give thanks to you with our whole heart.**

As we turn to you, help us to turn away from all that distracts us:
**we will give thanks to you with our whole heart.**

As we come into your presence

send your life-giving Spirit that we may see the world as you do:
**God's praise endures for ever. Amen.**

**Prayer of Confession**

Healing and forgiving God,
we confess to you before this congregation,
the times we have failed to recognise you in those whom we meet.
We confess to you the times we have walked away
from those who need your healing presence.
We confess to you the times we have hurt and failed others.
Be gracious, be merciful and heal us,
in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.

**The Lord’s Prayer**

**For all the family: Obeying God’s Word**

You will need a big clear jar, two signs one saying GOOD, the other saying BAD, another sign with an arrow, and a jug of water

Start by asking what rules are important. (school, road signs etc.).

Why do we have rules?

Do you have to obey rules?

What happens if you don’t obey rules?

Most of us do obey rules but sometimes its just easier to do our own thing. Sometimes rules are needed to remind us it’s not all about “me me me” but to remind us to treat others as we would like to be treated. The Bible is full of lots of rules but the one I like most is “Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And love your neighbour as yourself, as you would like to be treated.” The Bible gives all sorts of clues about how we can do this: (give examples which you think your congregation will understand). Follow God’s word and this will happen:

[Take the empty jar, put the Good and Bad signs either side of the jar. Take the arrow and point it towards the bad sign behind the clear jar]. Think of this water as obeying God’s Word. [Pour the water into the jar] The more you obey the more this happens…..[the sign is now reflected as pointing to the good sign].

Good or bad. The choice is yours.

# Readings

# Deuteronomy 18 vv.15-20 | St Mark 1 vv.21-28

**Sermon Notes**

In Epiphany we are adjusting to the wonder of the Jesus event as we read of how Jesus’ public ministry to gather momentum. Mark is the earliest and the briefest Gospel but we are still left out of breath by the sheer impact of what Jesus the man has achieved. There are no birth stories to ease our way in. *Immediately* (one of Mark’s favourite words) we are thrown into the public ministry of Jesus. And it’s time for fighting talk.

The scene in a Capernaum synagogue centres around questions of Jesus’ authority. Why does he do what he does? For whom does he speak and act? Who has authorized his ministry? The answers to those questions emerge through contests and controversies, beginning here and extending into Mark 3. And more will recur later in Mark’s Gospel too. But for now, Mark wants us to know, here at the outset of Jesus’ public ministry that Jesus’ authority will be a contested authority. Jesus’ presence, words, and deeds threaten other forces that claim authority over people’s lives. These other authorities have everything to lose.

There is no hesitation in the narrative. Mark tells us in his opening words that this amazing encounter is actually good news for the world. This is Mark’s message to his readers, for they are living in the toughest of times. Persecution faces the fledgling Christian community.

Where disasters both natural and man-made crowd the daily headlines. Only an astounding message can now pierce the darkness.

We are still in chapter one of this remarkable Gospel when Jesus is seen to be confronting the demons of his day. The contest does not last long - this isn’t exactly the fairest of fights in terms of the strength. Mark gives no information about what happens to the spirit. It is destroyed.

If you read Mark’s Gospel then you know ‘immediately’ that God is taking on the powers of darkness. It will all come to a breathtaking climax fifteen chapters later. And we are reminded that when Jesus hangs on the cross, and the darkness covers the whole earth a centurion there was moved to exclaim in wonder: *This man was truly God’s Son*. (Mark 15.39)

Who is Jesus? Is the question we need to ask in the light of this epiphany. The answer is unequivocal. This man is *The Holy One of God*. Even the winds and the waves bow to his authority. It is clear that nothing in all creation is able to stand in the way of God’s presence in Christ Jesus. Throughout the Gospels, the representatives of evil and the powers of darkness all give testimony to this truth.

Jesus is the one who claims the authority to make assertions about the way things are and the way things shall be. Jesus is the one who speaks about the newness of the kingdom of God breaking through and nothing is able to stand in its way. Jesus is the one who speaks on behalf of God.

In Jesus’ time there was an urgent hope that the prophecy of Deuteronomy would again be fulfilled, that there would arise a prophet like Moses whose relationship with God would give new life to Israel’s traditions. Mark’s Jesus is recognised as the one with such personal authority to bring the Scriptures to life powerfully in the present, ‘not as the scribes’ who only copied out what had been written in the past. The opposition of ‘the unclean spirit’ to ‘the Holy One of God’ echoes Deuteronomy’s choice between ‘other gods’ and ‘your God’, disobedience and obedience, death and life.

Prophets are a rather complicated gift. According to Deuteronomy they were a gift from God to the people who needed to hear what God had to say but were too afraid to listen because they might not like what was being said.

The context for Deuteronomy is at the end of Moses’ life as the wandering Israelites prepare to enter the Promised Land. Moses is the only leader they have ever known, and his impending death puts the community in jeopardy. Such times as these Prophets are vital to the wellbeing of the people. The problem was not finding a prophet it was finding a prophet that was truly speaking for God. 2 Kings tells that the king of Israel had 400 prophets at his disposal!

The writers of Deuteronomy were practical people. The proof of the pudding was in the eating. The word from true prophets had authority because there was evidence afterwards that what they had said was true. Turn back to God says the prophets or else God will allow people will be taken into captivity by Assyria says Hosea’ God's coming judgment will be visited on the northern kingdom of Israel says Amos’  Jerusalem will be laid waste says Micah. Such is their authority.

The same is true for Jesus. Mark’s evidence is stark: the sick were healed, the demons were cast out; the kingdom was breaking through into people’s lives. In Jesus, the power of God over all that diminishes human life was present.

Is Jesus the real deal? Is he really speaking for God, or is he just another itinerant prophet? Many did not believe him because they had already formed their own ideas of what the Messiah was to be, and Jesus’ message of grace and forgiveness was nothing like they envisioned. Yet all of the things in the Deuteronomy passage an be shown in Jesus’ life, preaching, and death.

So where are the prophets today? Who speaks for God? Prophets are selected by God for the sake of the people. Prophets answer to God, not to the people, so they are free to speak the truth. Prophets also come “from among their own people”. These speakers of truth are home grown. They know the ways and the hearts of the people they speak to and connect with them. They who speak for God must also be paid attention to, for to ignore their calls is the same as ignoring God.

We are the prophets of our time. We may find difficulty in our effort to discern the word of God in our midst, and yet the task is of the utmost importance. The task of determining God’s word to us will require a great effort on our part and a willingness to listen for the word that challenges all that we hold dear and believe to be true. n the light of Epiphany as the powers of darkness fade let us acknowledge that the word of God is, indeed, difficult to bear and to hear, but the alternative — being cut off from God, unable to look beyond our human limits and see God’s dream for us and for his world is simply untenable.

**Prayers of Intercession**

O God, Giver of Life,

in the dark places of the world where ignorance & fear breed cruelty & destruction,
may your Holy Spirit move **to banish all fear..**

In the hearts of powerful leaders and governments
who can change the world for worse or better,
may your Holy Spirit move **to banish all fear..**

Through the healing touch of doctors and nurses in hospitals and hospices,
wherever people cry for comfort,
may your Holy Spirit move **to banish all fear..**

Wherever your children's hearts are broken,
and love in families and amongst friends has died,
may your Holy Spirit move **to banish all fear..**

Where innocents are caught in turmoil and crossfire,
and there's despair in every shadow,
may your Holy Spirit move **to banish all fear..**

Where your Church has forgotten to proclaim your message

and the voices of your people remain silent

may your Holy Spirit move **to banish all fear**

**that we may go forth and declare your redeeming love.**

**Now and always. AMEN.**

**Blessing**

Go forth from this place into the world,
seek out the lost and lonely,
care for those who are hurt and sick.
Go in the name of Christ to love and serve the Lord. **Amen.**

And the blessing of God Almighty

Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Be amongst us and remain with us

This day and for evermore. Amen.

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| **Hymn Suggestions** |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| Colours of Day | 572 |  | 167 | 1039 |
| Eternal God, your love’s tremendous glory | 33 |  | 3 | 822 |
| Holy, holy, holy is the Lord |  |  |  | 239 |
| At the name of Jesus | 261 | 458 | 317 | 41 |
| Go forth and tell! O Church of God, awake | 574 |  |  | 178 |
| Go in peace and make disciples |  | 682 |  |  |
| God’s Spirit is in My Heart | 576 |  | 404 |  |

RS – *Rejoice & Sing* | CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* | StF – *Singing the Faith* | MP – *Mission Praise*

**Other Music Ideas**

Why not play Bob Marley’s Redemption Song before worship as an example of music from a prophet? You could reference this in the sermon. You might also want to use Leonard Cohen’s The Future as he reflected on a post-Soviet era.