

The Vine at Home
Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B
Sunday 31st January 2021

Call to worship

Lord God, we are called here by your Holy Spirit. We are called here to listen, to pray, to join in fellowship and to sing of your glory.

Today may we come with open hearts and minds. Today may we still our thoughts. Today may your Spirit interrupt us with love and blessings. Amen.¹

Hymn: 363 STF – My Jesus, my Saviour

Opening Prayers

Generous and caring God, we come to you in answer to your invitation to satisfy our thirst for knowledge and our hunger for your love and guidance.

We come because you have promised to be faithful to us and we promise to try to live in a way that reflects your pattern for our behaviour and because we need to learn to look at the world through your eyes.

Forgive us for our wilful ways and our neglect of your truth and help us to be more in tune with your thoughts, as we seek to share your love and compassion for all your people.

Amen²

Let us now say the Lord's Prayer

Reading - Mark 1:21-28 The Man with an Unclean Spirit

21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. **22** They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. **23** Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, **24** and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." **25** But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" **26** And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. **27** They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He^[a] commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." **28** At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.³

Reflections on the readings

Today's reflection comes from Rev. Dr. Raj Patta, which he has entitled 'Celebrating Interruption: Reimagining Church'.

¹ Call to worship written by Wayne Grewcock

² Prayer: Generous and caring God by Marjorie Dobson

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I begin writing this reflection, right after attending a local preachers meeting, where we discussed the role of preachers in the present context, when some church buildings have reopened for worship, whilst others are still closed. In these changing times, how should we 'reimagine preaching in our local churches?' In our circuit, we have been doing 'Church at the market place' once a month, where we go two by two into the town centre, engaging in a conversation and listening to people's stories, which for me has been deeply spiritual and empowering.

In this kind of church, preaching is more about listening, rather than giving an exegetical study on a given text. For Jesus, there is no one-size-fits-all kind of spirituality. Jesus is still at work, today in 2021 and by his Spirit, the church is pioneering new ways of engaging in mission, showing us that God is dynamic, always creative and relevant for each time and space.

Today's text from Mark is a passage where Jesus goes into a synagogue on a Sabbath, preaches with authority, driving away an unclean spirit from a person, and amazes the congregation. Jesus is reimagining the place of worship by interrupting the norms and by offering creative ways of engaging in mission. To understand that re-imagination, we need to understand the importance of synagogue in Jesus' time.

One of the widely accepted theories for the origins of the synagogues are that they came into existence in the Babylonian exile as a replacement for the temple which was destroyed in 587BCE. Though this is an unsubstantiated and over-simplistic theory, what we do know is that synagogues are an amalgamation of three separate institutions: a prayer house, a study hall or school and a community centre. It is also important to recognise that synagogues differ from the temple in Jerusalem in at least three areas, in place, cult and in personnel. In contrast to temple being built on a holy place, synagogues were built anywhere and everywhere, including in private homes, for they did not serve as cosmic centres. Secondly, in contrast to the cult of the temple which was based on sacrifice, synagogue cult is bloodless, consisting of Torah study and prayer. Thirdly, synagogues were a lay-led organisation, where the priests did not serve as mediators as in the temple. Allow me to share two key things from this tradition, to help in our quest for reimagining our churches.

1) God in Jesus bends and breaks the rules of the temple/synagogue tradition.

If synagogues contrasted from the temple in Jerusalem, we need to recognise that God in Jesus not only contrasted but also reimagined the understanding of temple and synagogue in all the three crucial areas mentioned before.

- In terms of place - God in Jesus pitched his tent among the margins of the society, and therefore was born as a human and emptied to the point of being a slave.
- In terms of cult – God in Jesus became a victim in the hands of the Roman Empire for his values of the Kingdom of God, where he was executed publicly as a criminal.
- In terms of personnel – God in Jesus, by being fully divine and fully human, reconciled humanity to God and became the way, the truth and the life.

God in Jesus brings God close – being and becoming accessible to any one with arms open in love. Jesus was offering himself as a sign that the temple, and the whole religious institution of the time, could (and should) be reimagined. Our churches are called to be like Jesus, busy in striving for the kingdom of God.

2) God in Jesus interrupts the teaching of the synagogue tradition:

As a Jewish Rabbi, Jesus on a Sabbath day went into a synagogue in Capernaum and teaches with authority, with passion and zeal for God. The congregation were astounded, for he taught them as one having authority. Jesus interrupts the traditional kind of teaching that was usually done by scribes. Jesus carries out this interruption in six ways:

- Synagogues were places for prayer, study of Torah and used for community gatherings. Firstly, with a very literal interruption, when Jesus was at this synagogue, he interrupts (as in pauses) his teaching session and recognises a man with an unclean spirit, and listens to his shouts.
- Secondly, his interruption is defined by healing. His authority is exhibited in his response to the interruption – replying with words of healing.
- Thirdly, we notice that Jesus disrupts the synagogue tradition by being interrupted and by offering healing to that man with the unclean spirit on a Sabbath.
- Fourthly, Jesus interrupts the notion that people with unclean spirits are outcast people, and made the synagogue a place for all people, and all means all, an inclusive place.
- Fifthly, in Jesus' reply to this man with unclean spirit, "Be silent and come out of him," he showed care to the person. Jesus wasn't judgemental, rather he loved him.
- Sixthly, Jesus turned that synagogue into a place of wonder, interrupting from the routine and repetition of the same things being done every Saturday. At the healing of this person the entire congregation was filled with awe and surprise, and called his teaching, 'a new teaching – with authority!'

That local synagogue in Capernaum would have been in the headlines, for the message Jesus articulated that day transformed that place of worship into an imaginative place of wonder, healing and inclusivity.

This text calls our churches, ministry, preaching, discipleship and mission engagements to re-imagination, striving to seek a relevance for our times today. Let us not be complacent with the kind of work we do, repeating the same thing again and again might not be the way forward. For a changing time, we need a reimagined church and ministry, interrupting the norm and striving to be radical and relevant. We are called to join with Jesus in interrupting the status quo.

When food poverty is on the rise in our context today, we are called as a church on the one hand to feed the hungry and on the other hand to call to accountability those that are the reason for the growth of hunger and food banks. By doing such a thing, we are radically reimagining ourselves as a church preaching with Jesus' authority.

Never underestimate the power of a local congregation. God in Jesus is capable of working with us in our vulnerabilities and powerlessness with small numbers, for God has not given up on us as a church. God is inviting us to be bold in reimagining our churches, interrupting routine, and is calling us to embark on the mission filled with wonder and awe. The question we need to ask is: how can we make our churches into spaces of wonder and love for all people, where 'all' means 'all'? ⁴

⁴ Reflection written by Raj Bharat Patta

What are you called to?

“...proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.” 2 Timothy 4:2, NRSV

Today, we have four questions to reflect on – you might like to break into small groups to discuss these after worship, or arrange to meet / have a conversation in the week to follow up with your thoughts as we work through these questions, with a short pause after each.

- 1) What is it that excites you about God’s word, and how could you communicate this with others? *[Pause]*
- 2) How can the worship and preaching of the church be transformed so that others can meet God and grow in faith? *[Pause]*
- 3) In the worship today, how have I been transformed, in any way, however small? *[Pause]*
- 4) In the worship today, I met you Lord in.... *[Pause]*

Prayers of intercession

Holy and awesome God, who created all things, we dare to draw near to you.

We approach you with reverence and yet with confidence, for you have assured us of your love for us, your children. You delight in us when we come to you and invite us to make our petitions and intercessions.

We pray for your world, created through your power and with your authority, designed to be perfect and sustainable, providing life in all its fullness. We are sorry for the ways in which we have failed to care for your creation. Teach us how to make amends.

We pray for the peoples of the world, remembering those who suffer from lack of food, shelter, health and educational opportunities. Bless those who work to bring about justice and peace, restoring a balance through equal sharing of resources. Teach us how we all benefit when each person may realise their potential.

We pray for our young people and children and their teachers, and for those in government and leadership of any kind; that all who have authority may use it wisely and for the good of others. Teach us to discern the truth and act on it for your kingdom’s sake.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.⁵

Hymn: 404 STF – God’s spirit is in my heart

Blessing

As you leave this place, go with the courage to live out the calling Jesus has placed on your heart, to re-imagine and re-create by God’s Spirit, seeking peace in a divided world. Go, by the grace of God. Amen.⁶

⁵ Prayers of intercession written by Alison Judd

⁶ Additional prayers by Tim Baker