

The saying goes you can only make one first impression, so you better make a good one. While this is obviously an over simplification of human relationships, since we all know that things can change over time, there is a degree of truth in it. I'm sure that each of us can remember times where we made either a good or bad first impression with someone, and how that impression impacted the way our relationship developed over time. I am often caught off guard how impactful first impressions can, how important they are in the way I remember someone, even after I have gotten to know them, even if that first impression proved only a small part of who they are. While first impressions can be deceiving, often they show us what a person is really like, what a person is like when there is nothing else influencing your relationship with them. In books and stories we can often get a sense of who a character is once we have seen their first actions in a story. Does the hero of the story act like a hero or not? Are the characters kind or indifferent with their actions?

While characters in books change, while people grow and change the actions people take, the things that people do are a revelation of their true identity, are a window into who they are at their core. Words are important, what people say matters, but people can say a lot of things without following it up with action, words are given weight by the actions we take. Talking the talk is great, but the question is whether a person walks that talk too. A person's first action, their first activity, their first impression, doesn't give us a full picture of who they are but it likely gives us a glimpse into what's important to them and what type of person they are.

In the reading we heard from the Gospel of Mark this morning we get a glimpse into Jesus' first public activity, we get a glimpse not just into his words but into his actions. We get a glimpse into what Mark wants to emphasize about Jesus, we get a glimpse into what Jesus' ministry is ultimately all about. Last week we heard Jesus proclaiming the Good News of God, we heard him say "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe the good news." Here Jesus declares what his ministry is about, he declares that his ministry is about the kingdom of God coming near, it is about repenting and believing this good news. But what does it mean for the Kingdom of God to come near? What does the kingdom of God coming near look like?

While last week we heard the first public words of Jesus' ministry, today we hear about the Gospel of Mark's take on Jesus' first public actions in his ministry, we get a first impression as to what Jesus means about the Kingdom of God coming near, about what it means for the time to be fulfilled. And what a first impression it is, especially for our modern sensibilities. Our passage begins with Jesus teaching in the temple: teaching that astounded and amazed everyone present because he taught as with one who had authority and not as scribes taught. And then in the midst of his teaching a man with an unclean spirit, a demon, cries 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." In response we hear Jesus rebuke and command the demon or unclean spirit to be silent and to come out of the man. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' first public act is an exorcism.

So does that mean that Jesus is best remembered as Jesus, the Exorcist, and not Jesus, the Teacher, the Shepherd, the Saviour, the King? Does this mean that exorcism, the casting out of demons is what it means for the Kingdom of God to come near? Is this the Good News that Jesus called his followers to believe? The answer I would venture is both yes and no. No in that the kingdom of God coming near is not uniquely or specifically about Jesus' cosmic battle with demons and the forces of evil. Yes in that exorcism points beyond itself to something far greater about Jesus' ministry than a battle between God and the forces of evil.

Grappling with the stories of Jesus casting out demons and healing people can be difficult for us today. We live in a radically different worldview from the writer of the Gospel of Mark. We live in a worldview where we have a completely different understanding of what makes human experience dangerous, a completely different view of where illnesses come from and a different view of powers and

forces that are beyond our control. Here in Canada, it is difficult to wrap our heads around exorcism, it is difficult to see these acts as crucial to who Jesus is and how these acts are crucial in helping us to understand what the Kingdom of God is really like. But they are crucial. They are crucial because they reveal to us who Jesus is really is: Jesus is a boundary breaker and he reveals to us a boundary breaking God.

In Jesus, we see over and over again that every boundary that we put in place, every boundary that we think exists, every boundary that we think is impenetrable God bursts through. Jesus declares and demonstrates that God bursts through every boundary we can imagine, whether they be political, social, religious, ethical, sexual, gender or cosmic. In Jesus, God goes one step further: declaring that even death, which seems to us the ultimate boundary, is not beyond God's power to shatter, that in Jesus Christ death is no longer a boundary for those who put their trust in him.

If we understand Jesus as a breaker of boundaries then it makes perfect sense for an exorcism to be Jesus' first public action of declaring the kingdom of God. An exorcism points to Jesus stepping into the realm of opposing cosmic powers and declaring God is here. God is here even in the unclean, even in the evil places of this universe. Jesus' exorcism declares that God is present even in the places where we believe that God would never, the places that seem the very opposite of God.

The entirety of Jesus' life and ministry points to this fact, points to this declaration, that even when it seems that God is absent, even in deepest and darkest places, even when it seems evil has triumphed, Jesus declares "God reigns. God is here." When Jesus is abandoned by his friends and betrayed by Judas, we remember that God is there. As Jesus is tried and convicted of crimes that he is innocent of, we remember that God is there. In his death on a Cross, we hear this declaration resounding "Even in death, even in this humiliation. God is here. Even... no ... especially here God reigns." When we read of the empty tomb at the end of Mark's Gospel and the disciples' fear, we hear the declaration one final time: even in the emptiness, even where it seems that God is absent: God is here. God reigns."

As we experience pain in our lives, as we witness the atrocities that go on and on in this world, as we experience moments of doubt in our lives, as we experience moments of temptation, moments of spiritual dryness: God's promise to us, made to us in his son Jesus Christ, is that even there he reigns; even in those places in our lives or in the world where it seems evil has dominion, even in those places God is there, even in those places we can never be separated from the love of God. In a passage from the letter to Romans, that we so often read at funerals, St. Paul describes this so eloquently, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Nothing, and I mean nothing can separate us from the love of God. Not our hard-heartedness, not our feelings of unworthiness, not our past, present or future sin, not our faith or lack of it, not even our deaths can separate us from God and his love for us in Jesus. No boundary that we can try to erect, no boundary that we believe exists can contain God, because God is a breaker of boundaries. No matter what God is here, no matter what God reigns.

Maybe this sounds too good to be true, maybe it sounds great but your experience has told you that God is nowhere to be seen. My only response is that God reigns, that God is there precisely in those moments of doubt, that in Jesus Christ we bear witness to a God that breaks through every barrier that shatters any boundary that gets in the way between God and his beloved. You are his beloved, we are his beloved. God is here! God reigns! Amen