

Call to worship (based on Psalm 111)

Come, and praise God!

In the company of the God's people,
let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

Great are the works of God, full of glory and majesty.

Our God is gracious and compassionate; our God is merciful and forgiving
our God is faithful and trustworthy, our God is just and good.

So come, let's worship God together.

God's praise will last forever!

Hymn Rejoice the Lord is King! MP 575

Gifts

Loving God, you are never far from us, you are as close as our breathing.

We recognize you as the one who heals the wounded spirit
and gives new life to the broken hearted.

We offer these gifts to You, O God,
as a sign of our commitment to Your grace and authority.

Take us and use us and all that we have,
so that the Kingdom of Heaven will be realized on earth; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Opening Prayers

We give you all thanks and praise, O God,
for your justice stands in splendour and majesty,
and you nourish the faithful
with mercy and kindness.

You are the one God who created all things and for whom we exist.

From the beginning you have revealed your mighty deeds
and upheld a covenant with your chosen ones.

You raised up among your people a prophet greater even than Moses,
your Son and our teacher, Jesus Christ.

With words and deeds of authority he has taught us,
not the knowledge that puffs up,
but the love that builds up.

You put your holy words in his mouth,
and at his word even the demons fall silent.

When he was killed, you raised him to life,
and now it is through him that we exist,
and in him, that the grip of death is broken forever.

Therefore, with our hearts lifted high,
we offer you thanks and praise at all times
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Hymn Jesus lover of my soul MP 372

Bible readings: **Mark 1:21-28**
 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Both of today's readings are tricky for us as modern people living in the 21st century and remind us of the importance of knowing the context in which they were written and in which Jesus and the early Christians lived, before we try to interpret a meaning for us today.

The story in Mark is Jesus's first act of power, his first miracle, if you will, in Mark's Gospel. Up to now he has been baptized by John, been tempted in the wilderness and chosen his first four followers. Now we get to the first real actions of his ministry – he teaches in the synagogue, and he performs an exorcism, for that is what this is. We don't hear much about exorcisms these days, at least not in a nice middle-class United Reformed Church, if we ever did! And we don't think of evil spirits as being the cause of illness. To attribute symptoms of shouting and convulsing with possession by an unclean spirit does not fit with our understanding of the causes of mental or physical illness. But 2000 years ago, they didn't have the medical knowledge we now have, or even that we had a few hundred years ago. Any healing that was done would have been by touch – the laying on of hands, prayer, or maybe some herbal remedies. Essentially if you got ill, you'd probably die – there were no antibiotics, no doctors or hospitals, so healers were revered and would quickly gather a following if they had any kind of success.

I hadn't realised before, how much casting out of demons Jesus actually does in Mark's gospel. It happens a lot! In chapter three he also gives his disciples authority to cast out demons and then is accused by his own family and the scribes, the religious leaders, of not being in his right mind himself and of being possessed by Satan. To modern ears, this is the stuff of horror films or sci-fi dramas, but the people Jesus was talking to, believed that unclean spirits could possess people and make them ill, and casting the spirit out would heal that person.

This story sets up the conflict that structures the first half of Mark's gospel and that has already been shown in the temptation of Jesus by Satan in the wilderness. It is the conflict between the power of evil, associated with Satan and demons, and the power of God expressed through Jesus. This cosmic conflict is reflected in the earthly realm by the struggle of Jesus with demons, the constant controversy between Jesus and the "scribes and Pharisees," and the tension between Jesus and his family in chapter three. According to one commentator, the Gospel of Mark is an apocalyptic battleground. And it is all imminent. In the verses before this, Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of God has come, then Mark tells us twice that the fishermen "immediately" left their nets and followed him. There is an urgency to Mark's gospel – Jesus is bringing the Good News now. He not only teaches and preaches it, Jesus is the Good News, shown by the numerous healings and banishing of demons. The people who heard and saw Jesus, would have known he was something different, not like all the other preachers and healers going around. In fact, today's reading ends by saying, "At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding area."

The ancient world view that attributes illness to unclean spirits and demons that lies behind this story, although outdated medically, does dramatize the forces that continue to wreak havoc within individuals, communities, and countries — mental illness, obsessions with unhealthy social media, addiction, sexual abuse, culture wars and racial hatred. The gospel proclaims Jesus has “authority” over even the most unclean of spirits that continue to take us over. The language of Mark may feel like too much, too urgent, too weird, too not anything to do with us, but the overriding revelation that Jesus has authority still holds true. In Jesus is the kingdom of God fulfilled – he is something different, something new, the Holy One of God.

Who Jesus is matters for the way in which we would practice steadfast resistance to the ‘demons’ of today. Jesus is not self-aggrandizing but silences the demons when they speak of his identity. He is, from the beginning of his ministry in Galilee, self-effacing even as his reputation grows. We do not need to establish Jesus’s dominance through his acts of exorcism but rather note his self-awareness throughout the Gospel of Mark that he is on his own steadfast way to the cross that will usher in the way God wants the world to be.

Now let us turn to chapter 8 of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. The Corinthian community shows that the early church was far from perfect. They were struggling with all kinds of issues and the person who had founded the church there – Paul, had moved on to another pastorate. There was a lot of discord, misunderstandings, and arguments – perhaps not unlike churches these days! So, Paul sent this letter to the Corinthians to offer his advice on the matters that they were struggling with. First Corinthians 8:1–13 addresses one of the subjects over which they were experiencing disagreement and conflict: whether or not to eat food sacrificed to idols. This topic may look obsolete and not very interesting for the church today. In the same way that we no longer exorcize demons, we don’t have to worry about the risk of eating meat sacrificed to idols. In fact, unlike Muslims and Jews, we have not dietary requirements at all in our religion. What this passage has to say to us today is more about how we treat others, especially others who may not have as much book learning or education as others of us. I won’t say intelligence, because there are many different kinds of intelligence not based on academic study – where would we be without plumbers, electricians, people who collect the rubbish or recycle our waste – I could go on. This section of the letter to the Corinthians is about pastoral care, and Christian love. Understanding the social context of eating food, technically, meat, sacrificed to idols is important. Meat was not easily accessible; many Romans would have been vegetarian because meat was expensive. Cults, which often included animal sacrifices, provided the most common occasions when many people would have access to meat. There is

archaeological evidence that shows that some temples had dining rooms. In the ancient Mediterranean world, religious life was not separate from civic and social life. It is likely that some Corinthian Christians joined those cultic events, pagan festivals, without hesitation as an extension of their civic and social life and consumed food there. They had knowledge that their monotheistic faith would not be impeded by such activities. They knew enough about their new religion to know that they could eat anything – they believed there was only one God, so any food offered to pagan Roman idols or so-called gods, was just food. Free food, and meat they couldn't usually afford to eat. The problem was that there were others in the early Christian community who didn't realise that, or didn't have things so clear in their minds. They might think that meat sacrificed to idols was unholy in some way and that they would have to attend those pagan temples and participate in pagan rites to be able to get that food.

What is at issue here is the power dynamic that the eating was creating within the Corinthian community. Eating food sacrificed to idols becomes controversial when some Corinthians, who have considerable knowledge, exercise their power to the degree of destroying those who don't have that knowledge, those with a weak conscience, as the text says. Paul is worried that those whose consciences are weak might still believe there are other gods and idols. It is for that reason that Paul believes it is better to refrain from eating meat sacrificed to idols. In Paul's words, "If food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall".

Paul's solution to this conflict among the Corinthians is not to encourage those with a weak conscience to gain more knowledge until they are in no doubt that there is only one God. Instead, he asks those with the knowledge to grow in love. He equates offending members of your family with sinning against them and, with sinning against Christ. It is love that binds and strengthens a community. As Paul puts it, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up". Paul wants the Corinthians to understand that the church will be united when those with knowledge are careful in choosing what they can do; when they care for members of the community who are weaker in some way. Paul is speaking here as a pastor, not as a theologian. For Paul the key to community-building is love - to love those who do not agree with me, those whom I cannot understand easily. Harmony is not the state of agreeing with each other on certain knowledge, but of loving each other amid disagreement.

Hymn One Sabbath Day – words at the end Tune MP 148 (For all the saints)

Prayers of intercession

Most holy Friend, Saviour of those who call on you, please give us more of the compassion and authority of Jesus. Embolden us to heal the multiple issues that afflict humanity and drive out the demons that afflict our contemporary world.

Loving God, in your abundant grace, hear our prayers

Send your wisdom and authority to lands that lie under darkness and oppression; where government is corrupt, justice is rare, abuse is endemic, and the weak and the poor have nowhere to turn for hope. We pray especially for countries caught up in war and conflict – Palestine, Yemen, and Ukraine. **Loving God, in your abundant grace, hear our prayers**

Send your messengers to situations where curable or manageable diseases are reaping a grim harvest. Give authority to people of disciplined compassion, to provide pharmaceutical help, nursing care, and better health education that will drive out the demons of superstition and fatalism.

Loving God, in your abundant grace, hear our prayers

Send your servants into places where food is scarce and crops are poor. Please strengthen the authority of those local leaders and outside advisers, who seek to empower the people to conserve water, dig new wells, plant trees, grow new food crops, farm fish, start new cottage industries, and obtain better prices for their goods.

Loving God, in your abundant grace, hear our prayers

Send your human angels of mercy into situations, both here and abroad, where there is neglect, illness, sorrow, frustration and anger. Give some of the compassionate authority of Jesus to chaplains in hospitals and prisons, to nurses and paramedics, doctors and surgeons, social workers and foster parents, police officers and counsellors.

Loving God, in your abundant grace, hear our prayers

Grant us some of your power and authority to make changes in the world. To call for more action on climate change. And we pray for those affected by this weeks storms, who have been living without electricity. For those affected by flooding and earthquakes.

Loving God, in your abundant grace, hear our prayers

Send your gifts of comfort and great joy among the many congregations of your church. May more of the spiritual authority of Jesus empower every ordinary church member, and the wisdom and compassion of Christ enlarge the ministries of lay leaders and ordained ministers. By the grace of Christ, may our deeds more adequately match our words, and our love expand to embrace those in our midst who appear lonely and unlovable. In the SILENCE we call before you those in our own families and congregation who are ill or mourning.

Loving God, in your abundant grace, hear our prayers

God, our most holy Friend, in your mercy may we go from strength to strength in things of the spirit, and become the lovers and the agents of that holy awe which is the beginning of true wisdom. Through Christ Jesus our Lord, who taught us when we pray to say

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn Praise my soul the king of heaven MP 560

Blessing

Go now

...replenished by the grace and mercy of God,

...blessed by the healing love of Jesus,

And energised by the limitless power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One Sabbath Day

One Sabbath day, our Jesus came to share,
at synagogue, in readings and in prayer,
to show God's love to all assembled there:
our hurting healer; our God come nearer!

You taught with pow'r, with bold authority,
not like the scribes manoeuvring carefully;
you spoke for God, explaining gloriously:
our hurting healer; our God come nearer!

A man burst in, by demon-power possessed;
all gathered there were troubled and distressed.
Yet by your word, you cured him and impressed:
our hurting healer; our God come nearer!

You gave and gave, and then went out to pray,
to seek renewal at the break of day;
the cost to you was more than we can say:
our hurting healer; our God come nearer!

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