

Leave Us Alone

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 13th of July 2003. The preacher is Carol Elpherson. Her sermon is entitled Leave Us Alone and is based on Luke chapter 4 verses 31 to 37.

Many years ago, Peter and I collected our car from a mechanic in a small country town. We'd broken a tie rod the previous weekend, driving on countryside searching for a perfect trout fishing spot.

Peter had heard about this. Unfortunately, the car was an old Valiant sedan and not a four-wheel drive, hence the broken tie rod.

And I still don't know what a tie rod was, but it meant our car wouldn't go. Anyway, the following weekend, the repairs were completed and so we picked up the car and we began our drive home.

The road was a single-lane highway and before long, we found ourselves slowing down behind a large truck that was filled with coal.

[1 : 1 9] Peter waited for a safe opportunity to overtake him. When the road was clear, he pulled out, put his foot down on the accelerator and the engine hummed into action.

About halfway past the truck, it seemed that suddenly we weren't really moving anywhere and in fact, out of the corner of my eye, I could see that the truck was starting to gain on us.

We were gliding and losing power very quickly. No matter how far Peter pushed his foot down on the accelerator pedal, nothing seemed to happen.

Meanwhile, up ahead, another truck had started to come straight down in our direction. I turned to Peter and shouted, get back, pull back. And he said, no, we're too far forward to do that.

And just as he did, he then looked down at the gear stick and saw that the gear stick had actually slipped out of drive and into neutral. Quickly put it back into drive and on we went.

[2 : 2 2] Well, we got into our lane with literally a second to spare. I've never been so terrified nor felt so powerless in my entire life.

Even thinking about it, and it was almost 30 years ago, I can still feel the adrenaline rush. The car's response was unexpected and surprising.

And when we were expecting the power, we didn't have it. This morning's reading in Luke, and you may like to look at it, it's on page 836.

This reading is about Jesus' power and authority in ministry. And it follows from last week's reading where Jesus was preaching in his hometown in Nazareth.

And you may recall, for those who are there, Jesus was rejected by the people who knew him best. Nazareth was his hometown, and yet the people did not accept him.

[3 : 2 5] Now he moves to the coastal town of Capernaum on the lakeside of Lake Galilee. And we see a totally different response.

Instead of rejecting him, we're told the people are amazed. Again it was the Sabbath. Again Jesus was teaching. But this time instead of the anger and resentment that the people at Nazareth gave, they were astounded.

Why? Because, as verse 32 says, he spoke with authority. When I first started my degree at Ridley, I hadn't studied for a long time.

When the time came for my first essay, I didn't really know where to start. I put it off for a while, and finally I went to the library. Well, of course, all the books.

The recommended texts had gone by then. They'd already been borrowed. So I borrowed this great pile of other books and hoped that somewhere along the line, I'd sort of be able to stumble upon what it was that I was meant to be writing about or finding out.

[4 : 33] So I started quoting author after author, commentator after commentator, hoping to cover all aspects of it so that somewhere along the line I'd have something right, and before I reached my word limit.

Well, that's a bit of an exaggeration, but the people in the synagogues had teaching a little bit like that from the rabbis. The rabbis would quote one learned sage or author after another.

They would say, well, Rabbi so-and-so said this. When they're looking at an interpretation of scripture, they'd say, well, Rabbi so-and-so says this, or Rabbi such-and-such says that, but on the other hand, the sages and the traditions say such-and-such, and they would go on and on and on like that.

Jesus' teaching was direct and explicit. He didn't refer to other authorities. His word had the authority, and the people were really amazed at this teaching.

So you can imagine the atmosphere in the synagogue that day. People were sitting still, attentive, leaning forward slightly to catch every word.

[5 : 53] You could hear a pin drop. Then, Let us alone! 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.

Wow. What a situation. I'd put that up there high on the list of difficult ministry situations, difficult preaching situations, to have someone yelling at me like that.

I mean, a baby crying, a toddler running around. The other various interruptions you get are okay, but someone shouting and screaming at you like that. What do you say? What do you do in such a situation?

What about if you were next to him? Did you feel like sort of moving a little bit further away from him? Further up the pew? It's uncomfortable, that sort of behaviour.

Unnerving even. Especially if you know him, if he's a regular parishioner even. You may feel a bit embarrassed, concerned for him. Not that demon possession was unheard of in those days, and because demons could produce sickness or frenzies, exorcists were sought.

[7 : 07] And so there were Jewish exorcists who would perform these sorts of things and they would do them in great elaborate rituals. There'd be certain words and phrases that would be said, certain things that were done, procedures.

It was quite a great dramatic action. And it was not always successful. What a contrast. When Jesus deals with this demon in verse 35, he simply rebukes him, tells him to be silent and to come out.

Jesus demands silence. He will not engage with him. He will not enter into a discussion or conversation. The Son of God will have nothing to do with this evil demon.

Instead, he delivers the demon from the man safely and swiftly and decisively.

He requires no elaborate ritual, no certain formula of words to successfully deliver the man. He simply issues a command and the demon obeys.

[8 : 17] Now that's power. And the people in the synagogue realise this. Not only does Jesus teach and preach with authority without having to refer to other teachers, now they see he has the power to act.

And they're amazed. This passage is one of a series of snapshots that we see in Luke's Gospel of the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

After his baptism with the Holy Spirit, Jesus was tempted by the devil for 40 days in the desert. During this time, the devil sought to get him to worship him.

He sought Jesus' allegiance and his worship. He even promised him all the kingdoms and the authority of all the kingdoms of earth if he would bow down and worship the devil.

Today we see what a deceptive offer that was. The devil's authority was no match for Jesus'. Like an army corporal competing with a major general.

[9 : 38] Authority needs power to be enacted. And Jesus unmistakably displays that power. Jesus' ministry inaugurated the coming in of God's kingdom, the breaking in of God's reign here on earth.

and God's kingdom would defeat Satan. And with the casting out of the demons that day in Capernaum, we see that the kingdom of God was approaching.

And that's why the silence in the synagogue was interrupted by the loud and terrified voice calling out, leave us alone. They knew their time was up.

Leave us alone, they beseeched, because they knew that Jesus had the power to destroy them. The day of the Lord's favour had begun.

Jesus came to proclaim release to captives, to set free the oppressed, as the prophet Isaiah had said hundreds of years before.

[10 : 51] The man in the synagogue was freed of his oppression. Though the demon threw him to the ground in a last desperate rage, we're told in verse 35 that he was not hurt.

This contrasts with some of the exorcisms that we even sometimes read about today where people can be badly hurt, and I think a few years ago someone even died through the use of excessive force in an exorcism.

we see Jesus' word has the power to deliver the demon from the man. The Bible portrays demons as some sort of evil beings who, together with Satan, their master, oppose God's sovereign rule, sovereign control.

They're in rebellion against God and seek to influence people away from following the ways of God. Jesus' death on the cross, his resurrection, and his ascension, means that we have victory over Satan.

It was evil that put Jesus to death on the cross, but it was God's power that enabled Jesus to rise triumphantly. The fact that Jesus rose from the dead is our guarantee that he has victory over death.

[12 : 14] Death could not hold him down. But while he was defeated, Satan's final overthrow will not occur until the day that Jesus returns.

Then the victory will be complete. Then God's kingdom will be fully consummated here on earth. But until that time, Satan and his demons will continue to roam the earth, seeking to corrupt and influence people.

It's a bit like a dead rattlesnake. I was reading how doctors in a hospital in Phoenix, Arizona were amazed at the number of patients they had each year who claimed to have got bitten by a rattlesnake that that was meant to be dead.

They'd actually shot the rattlesnake or killed it in some way, so they knew it was dead. But even up to an hour later, it was able to strike and inject its venomous poison after its death.

In Genesis, right at the beginning of the Bible, it speaks of Satan as a serpent. And like a cut rattlesnake, he's still continuing to exercise his venomous and rebellious activity here on earth.

[13 : 36] but his authority is usurped and it's ultimately under God's sovereign control. His time is limited and it will not continue forever.

It's been disarmed by Christ and the final outcome, as the book of Revelation tells us, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of Sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented forever and ever.

So I suppose the question is, how do we live our life in the light of this morning's passage? How do we live in these end times waiting for that final and glorious day and knowing that Satan continues to roam?

The focus in the Bible is on truth. We need to know the truth that's in the Bible so that when temptations come we will not be led astray, we will not fall into the temptation to sin.

Satan's main tool is deception, leading people away from the truth. He attempted to deceive Jesus during his trial in the desert. elsewhere in the Bible we're warned of false prophets and apostles and Paul in 2 Corinthians says that even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light and his ministers as ministers of righteousness.

[15 : 11] I don't know if you've seen the film Liar Liar but Jim Carrey the actor in that film his character was a successful lawyer and the reason he was so successful was he used deception and a lot of falsehood to gain his point.

Well Satan is the prince of all deception of lies and trickery and his falsehoods can be very subtle as he influences people away from doing what is right and into a lifestyle of rebellion against God honouring self or seeking to fill up their need for spirituality with false gods with idols.

We can be tempted to use our time and money unwisely for selfish gains in seeking excessive pleasure pursuits. I recently saw a show on TV about a monk living in a cave near the Dead Sea area in Israel and he lives in this self-imposed exile almost year in and year out.

He has very little in way of clothing and furniture not really any need for a car TV or stereo and I thought to myself how we tend to clutter up our lives with so many other things.

I'm not thinking of packing up and moving out to the Nullarbor. Peter's probably pleased to hear. But there is a tendency to indulge in excesses that I think we all need to look at and to be careful.

[16 : 55] There's always the glossy magazines and TV ads imploring us to have this or to have that telling us we need this or that. Indulge ourselves pamper ourselves we deserve it they say.

The Bible tells us to be self-controlled and to be generous in our giving. Instead of storing up treasures on earth we're exhorted to store up treasures in heaven where moths and rust cannot get in and destroy them and where thieves cannot steal.

there's also a temptation in our lives to work excessively to leave little room and time and energy for church activities for Bible studies for prayer or forgiving of our time and talents in the service of God's people.

Jesus warned his followers that no one can serve two gods or two masters you can't serve both money and God.

there's a temptation to discount the seriousness the Bible holds of greed and gluttony to forget that it's listed as part of the lifestyle that Christians are called to put to death.

[18 : 17] When we give in to these temptations we are rebelling against God and following the way of Satan. So how much emphasis do we need to place on the devil and his wily ways?

A survey conducted recently in the New York Times reported that two thirds of the respondents did not believe that the devil was a living entity. They saw him merely as a symbol for evil.

On the other hand I've met Christians who seem to spend their whole time talking about the devil and his evil influence. their emphasis sometimes seems to be more on Satan than on the power of God.

They seem to have lost sight of the fact that Jesus has defeated Satan on the cross. C.S. Lewis in his book The Screwtape Letters sums up the situation fairly well.

He writes there are two equal and opposite errors which the human race can fall into about devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence.

[19 : 29] The other is to believe and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. There's an increasing interest in our secular world on spiritual things.

Here in St. Bourbon, Melbourne we can come across books shops that sell many sort of witchy and magical type stuff.

Our TV shows such as Charmed and Buffy the Vampire Slayer crossing over the books such as Harry Potter. Our local newspapers have a proliferation of horoscopes and clairvoyance and all the like.

And it just reflects the interest that is being shown in our society in spiritual things. There's a yearning after knowledge, a quest for answers, a recognition of a power greater than ourselves and a belief in the life after.

As Christians we can take opportunities to share our faith about the one true God to people. to let them know of Jesus' great power that there is a life after death and that Jesus came back from the dead to open a way for us to his heavenly kingdom for those who believe.

[21 : 00] And this is the good news that all need to hear. Searching for spirituality in other ways in some way other than Christ is a false spirituality.

it's unhealthy, deceptive, and ultimately destructive. It's a spirituality that's out of line of God's purposes for his people.

We're told in Deuteronomy, let no one among you be found who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist, or who consults the dead.

Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord, it says. The people of God were exhorted to consult their God, to look to him for answers, not to trust mediums or spiritists or the dead.

Only the knowledge of Jesus can set people free. As he set the man free from his bondage in Capernaum that day, he continues to release those who look to him from the bondage of sin.

[22 : 21] As Christians, we're called to submit to God and to take our stand against Satan by knowing and obeying his word. And we can do this in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God who gives and the Spirit God gives to all believers.

Amen.