

**Reflection on the Word—Mark 1:21–28**  
**Rev. Christine Gilbert**

“I know I’m not the milk and honey kind  
Today I proved it true  
When the red mist falls around my eyes  
I know not what I do”

Paul Kelly paints a picture of someone who has lost his cool. He wishes he could take those explosive moments back, start the day again and have things turn out differently. But, of course, as the song says, this prayer is in vain.

The scenario created by Kelly is honest, raw and one with which we can relate. All of us know what it is to be possessed by things that are less than life-giving. We know what it is to be ruled by addictions, fears, untested attitudes and perspectives, wounds from our past. Like the red mist that fell around the singer’s eyes or like the unclean spirit that troubled the man in the synagogue, when such things take hold, they often leave a trail of misunderstanding, upset and brokenness in their wake.

So, what are we to do about this predicament? How might we disempower, at least somewhat, our false thinking and distorted desires so that we can live more attuned to God and those “higher angels” we’ve heard about in recent weeks? This is, in part, the work and fruit of spirituality as it is presented in the Gospels and practiced through the Christian life.

Today’s Gospel reading tells of Jesus travelling through Capernaum with his disciples. The region was dotted with synagogues—all-purpose buildings used by the local Jewish community for schools, communal meals, collecting and distributing charity, and political meetings. Reading and interpreting the Torah also took place in synagogues with Rabbis debating and contextualising the finer points of the law as scribes, like court stenographers or secretaries, ensured accuracy and recorded conclusions.

Jesus appeared to be at home in this scene. In fact, it was Jesus who affected those in the synagogue that day. We’re told they were astounded and amazed by this new teaching, a teaching with enough authority to silence and cast out the destructive forces that can take over from time to time.

According to the Gospel, what is on offer in Jesus is a wholistic transfiguration of body, soul and mind. We are able to go beyond simply denying, covering and managing. We can abandon the self-help projects and the incessant trying to do better—efforts that are often unsuccessful anyway when it comes to possession at the deepest level. Instead, in the authoritative teaching of Jesus is the possibility of becoming new people; of being freed *from the inside out*.

Now, you may have noticed that this story did not include any overt teachings. In fact, this is often the case in Mark who uses the title “teacher” for Jesus twelve times—more than the names Christ or Son of God—but includes relatively few overt teachings or parables compared with the other Gospels. (beatitudes, sermon on the mount, familiar parables)

We might conclude from this that what is efficacious for us in Jesus is found not so much in his words or in specific actions, but in the *total embodiment of grace, truth and love as witnessed in his life, death and resurrection*. Jesus himself *is the parable* and our drawing near to contemplate him and his way is healing and transformative.

Jesus is portrayed as one who is entirely self-possessed. He is immersed in God and full of light and integrity. Though able to bring a commanding presence that astounds, he deflects the projections of others and humbly identifies with those who are otherwise neglected, disempowered, despised and marginalised. His authority comes not from status or personal cleverness but from his closeness to God, the source of love and truth.

But what exactly does this mean for us? How do we draw near to Jesus whose Spirit is intangible and whose presence is like the wind? Part of engaging our spirituality is finding practices and disciplines—often through trial and error—that attune our hearts to God. Despite the religion and motivational shelves in bookstores, there is no one-size-fits-all program for spiritual growth. What enables us to immerse ourselves in Jesus as parable is different for each one of us and it will most likely change over time.

One take away I have from today’s story, and granted my perspective is biased, is that sacred encounter requires silence. At the heart of every spiritual practice is an increasing awareness of Christ in and through all things. But in order to recognise this, there must be quiet, the chatter of the mind must be stilled somehow. So, like the unclean spirit that was silenced and cast out by Jesus, we are invited to observe intentional times of silence when we practice laying aside the distractions and falsity that seek to rule in us.

In her book *Silence, a User's Guide, Vol. 1*, Maggie Ross speaks of silence not simply as a sometimes thing or personal indulgence, but as a vocation for Christians with social and ecological consequences. It is a manifesto of sorts for those who wish to take their spirituality seriously. She writes:

*Life hangs in the balance.*

The choice for silence or noise, for carefulness or carelessness, is ours in every moment. To choose silence as the mind's default in an accelerating consumer culture—a culture that sustains itself by dehumanizing people through the unrelenting pressure of clamour, confusion, and commodification—is indeed a subversive act.

For the reality is that our lives *do* hang in the balance: between speech and silence, action and reflection, distraction and attention, extinction and survival. We bear responsibility for maintaining this balance, just as our choices for or against silence can affect the choices of everyone around us, choices that have both material and psycho-spiritual consequences. We seem to have forgotten this responsibility, for in the present time we are disconnected from the wellspring of silence and stillness that is necessary for human beings to thrive. These living waters no longer animate the speech and activity of our minds and bodies, lost as we are in a wasteland of our own making. If there is to be a viable ecology, if we are to remain human, if our lives are to have any meaning, if we are to continue as a viable species, it is essential that we restore the flow that enables our everyday lives to be informed by the riches found in silence.

May we recover the healing power of silence within our spiritual practice, and in the silence, encounter the Holy One who assures us that we are loved and who sets us free to live.