

Historic Commentary

(Fourth Sunday in Epiphany - Year B)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Mark 1:21-28 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Mark 1](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Venerable Bede](#): It was appropriate, since death first entered into the world through the devil's envy, that the healing medicine of salvation should first operate against him.... The presence of the Savior is the torment of the devils.

[Augustine](#): Unclean spirits knew that Jesus Christ would come. They had heard it from the angels, they had heard it from the prophets, so they were expecting him to come. For if not, why did they cry out, "What have we to do with you? Have you come to destroy us before the time? We know who you are, the holy one of God."

[Irenaeus](#): Even the demons cried out, on beholding the Son: "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." Later the devil looking at him and tempting him, would say: "If you are the Son of God." All of these thus recognized the Son and the Father, yet without believing. So it was fitting that the truth should receive testimony from all, and should become a means of judgment for the salvation not only of those who believe, but also for the condemnation of those who do not believe. The result is that all should be fairly judged, and that the faith in the Father and Son should be a matter of decision for all, so that one means of salvation should be established for all, receiving testimony from all, both from those belonging to it who were its friends, and by those having no connection with it who were its enemies. For that evidence is most trustworthy and true which elicits even from its adversaries striking testimonies on its behalf.

[John Chrysostom](#): Does no demon call upon God's name? did not the demons say, "We know who you are, O Holy One of God?" did they not say to Paul: "these men are the servants of the Most High God?" They did, but only upon scourging, only upon compulsion, never of their own will, never without being trounced.

[Ambrose](#): I do not accept the devil's testimony but his confession. The devil spoke unwillingly, being compelled and tormented.

Augustine: Call to mind with me the time when Peter was praised and called blessed. Was it because he merely said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”? No, he who pronounced him blessed regarded not merely the sound of his words, but the affections of his heart. Compare that with the words of the demons who said almost the same thing: “We know who you are, the Son of God,” just as Peter had confessed him as “Son of God.” So what is the difference? Peter spoke in love, but the demons in fear.... So tell us how faith is to be defined, if even the devils can believe and tremble? Only the faith that works by love is faith.

Augustine: Those words show clearly that the demons had much knowledge, but entirely lacked love. They dreaded receiving their punishment from him. They did not love the righteousness that was in him. He made himself known to them to the extent he willed; and he willed to be made known to the extent that was fitting. But he was not made known to them as he is known to the holy angels, who enjoy participation in his eternity, in that he is the Word of God. To the demons he is known as he had to be made known, by striking terror into them, for his purpose was to free from their tyrannical power all who were predestined for his kingdom and glory, which is eternally true and truly eternal. Therefore, he did not make himself known to the demons as the life eternal, and the unchangeable light which illuminates his true worshipers, whose hearts are purified by faith in him so that they see that light. He was known to the demons through certain temporal effects of his power, the signs of his hidden presence, which could be more evident to their senses, even those of malignant spirits, than to the weak perception of human beings.

Augustine: Faith is mighty, but without love it profits nothing. The devils confessed Christ, but lacking charity it availed nothing. They said, “What have we to do with you?” They confessed a sort of faith, but without love. Hence they were devils. Do not boast of that faith that puts you on the same level with the devils.

Athanasius: He put a bridle in the mouths of the demons that cried after him from the tombs. For although what they said was true, and they did not lie when they said, “You are the Son of God” and “the Holy One of God,” yet he did not wish that the truth should proceed from an unclean mouth, and especially from such as those who under pretense of truth might mingle with it their own malicious devices.

Venerable Bede: The devil, because he had deceived Eve with his tongue, is punished by the tongue, that he might not speak.

John Calvin: The devil dexterously acknowledges, that Christ is the Holy One of God, in order to insinuate into the minds of men a suspicion, that there was some secret understanding between him and Christ. By such a trick he has since endeavored to make the Gospel suspected, and, in the present day, he is continually making similar attempts. That is the reason why Christ rebukes him. It is, no doubt, possible, that this confession was violently extorted from him: but there is no inconsistency between the two suppositions, that he is forced to yield to the power of Christ, and therefore cries out that he is the Holy One of God, – and yet that he cunningly attempts to shroud in his own

darkness the glory of Christ. At the same time, we must observe that, while he flatters Christ in this manner, he indirectly withdraws himself from his power, and in this way contradicts himself. For why was Christ sanctified by the Father, but that he might deliver men from the tyranny of the devil, and overturn his kingdom? But as Satan cannot endure that power, which he feels to be destructive to himself, he would desire that Christ should satisfy himself with an empty title, without exercising it on the present occasion.

Mark 1:22

And they were astonished at his doctrine: The meaning of the Evangelists is, that the power of the Spirit shone in the preaching of Christ with such brightness, as to extort admiration even from irreligious and cold hearers. Luke says, that his discourse was accompanied with power, that is, full of majesty. Mark expresses it more fully, by adding a contrast, that it was unlike the manner of teaching of the Scribes As they were false expounders of Scripture, their doctrine was literal and dead, breathed nothing of the power of the Spirit, and was utterly destitute of majesty. The same kind of coldness may be now observed in the speculative theology of Popery. Those masters do indeed thunder out whatever they think proper in a sufficiently magisterial style; but as their manner of discoursing about divine things is so profane, that their controversies exhibit no traces of religion, what they bring forward is all affectation and mere drivelling: for the declaration of the Apostle Paul holds true, that the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power, (1 Corinthians 4:20.) In short, the Evangelists mean that, while the manner of teaching, which then prevailed, was so greatly degenerated and so extremely corrupted, that it did not impress the minds of men with any reverence for God, the preaching of Christ was eminently distinguished by the divine power of the Spirit, which procured for him the respect of his hearers. This is the power, or rather the majesty and authority, at which the people were astonished.

Mark 1:26

When the unclean spirit had torn him Luke uses a milder phrase, when the devil had thrown him down: but they agree perfectly as to the meaning; for the design of both was to show, that the devil went out of the man in a violent manner. He threw down the unhappy man, as if he had intended to tear him: but Luke says that the attempt was unsuccessful; for he hurt him nothing Not that the attack was, in no degree whatever, attended by injury, or at least by some feeling of pain; but that the man was afterwards delivered from the devil, and restored to perfect health.

Mark 1:27

What new doctrine is this? They call it new doctrine, not by way of reproach, but as an acknowledgment, that there was something in it unusual and extraordinary. It is not for the sake of blame, or to lessen its credit, that they speak of it as new. This is rather a part of their admiration, that they pronounce it to be not common or ordinary. Their only fault lies in this, that they remain in their state of hesitation, whereas the children of God ought to make increasing progress.