

Bennochy church 28th January 2018

One day an old man was casually walking along a country lane with his dog and his mule. Suddenly a speeding pick-up truck careened around the corner, knocking the man, his mull and his dog into the ditch. The old man decided to sue the driver of the truck, seeking to recoup the cost of the damages. While the old man was on the stand, the counsel for the defence cross-examined the man by asking a simple question: "I want you to answer 'yes' or 'no' to the following question: Did you or did you not say at the time of the accident that you were 'perfectly fine'?"

And the man said, "Well, me and my dog and my mule were walking along the road ... " And the counsel for defence said, "Stop, stop, I asked you, tell me 'yes' or 'no', did you say you were 'perfectly fine' at the time of the accident?"

"Well, me and my dog and my mule were walking along the road and ... " The defence attorney appealed to the judge. "Your honour," he said, "the man is not answering the question. Would you please insist that he answer the question?" The judge said, "Well, he obviously wants to tell us something. Let him speak."

So the man said, "Well, me and my dog and my mule were walking along the road and this truck came around the corner far too fast, knocked us into the ditch. The driver stopped, got out of his truck, saw my dog was badly injured, went back to his

truck, got his rifle, and he shot it. Then he saw that my mule had broken his leg so he shot it. Then he said, 'How are you?' And I said, 'I'm perfectly fine.'"

All of us have been involved in uncomfortable conversations. Places we rather not be. I hate to mention Donald Trump, but I will, he seems a master of generating multiple uncomfortable conversations that did not previously exist. They are all of his own making. Actually, we have all been there. Something we should not have said, or even tweeted, maybe, that leads to heated debate, an argument, and we wonder how did I ever get myself into this situation. Then there is poor old Mr Bolton. I think he is still head of UKIP. It was not something he said, but what his former girlfriend tweeted. He is now embroiled in multiple uncomfortable conversations.

The bible is full of uncomfortable conversations. Mark here records a conversation in Capernaum between an man with an evil spirit in him, and Jesus. It is the Sabbath and Jesus has just amazed people with his teaching in the synagogue. Mark says, he taught there with authority.

A man approaches Jesus. We don't need to try and understand what Mark meant by 'evil spirit'. That will only side track us from the conversation itself. Listen to what the man says.

"What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Are you here to destroy us? I know who you are - you are God's holy messenger."

This is uncomfortable stuff. This is a challenge. This is evil verses holy. The spirit or spirits, says to Jesus, I have power over you, because I know your name. There was an ancient belief in the power of names. It was not just what you were called. It said something about who you were. I want to suggest, this encounter was deeply uncomfortable for Jesus. Why else would Mark have recorded it?

People were watching. Wondering what will happen next. Is there a moment of silence into which Jesus then exerts his authority. You might know my name, I say to you, be quiet. You might reside in this man. I am saying, be away with you! After a struggle, symbolised as the man shook and screamed, the spirit is released and man is healed.

Maybe after a brief pause, there is a growing level of noise as people begin to discuss what they have just witnessed. Mark gives us the impression that the people in the synagogue actually understand what has just happened. More than us, they can comprehend the world and language of evil spirits, and declare in the actions of Jesus, a new teaching. Recognising what has gone before. How God has spoken to his people. I believe they see a prophet in their midst. A man sent by God. And who better than prophets, to instigate uncomfortable conversations!

Prophets said things that people did not want to hear. They challenged Pharaohs, kings and men of power. 'Here the word of the Lord', they said, and many just shut their ears. We have prophets in our midst, people who challenge our comfortable beliefs, how we live and how we treat creation. They are people of nuisance. Never really welcomed. We wish they would just go away. Yet, we need these uncomfortable conversations. How else will we ever change? Left to our own devices; the comfortable way, is very attractive, as the one of least resistance.

These conversations, from family, friends, work colleagues and neighbours, and from our communities, challenge what we believe. Are we listening? Think of the struggle and pain caused to the Church of Scotland as it has debated the issue of human sexuality down through, what seems like decades! Many people were not comfortable in having such conversations.

The bible is not a simple story. As the prophets cry and God says, watch for the new things I am going to do. Those disturbing calls, at the same time there is the promise of God as the one that never changes. Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever. Our uncomfortable conversations with God, are at the same time, heard with words of comfort. The challenge of the cross, matched as Christ helps to bear its load, upon his shoulders, and, on ours. Amen.