

28Jan2024 Mark1.21-28 Authority of Jesus

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

8:1 Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. 2 Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; 3 but anyone who loves God is known by him. 4 Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one." 5 Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth--as in fact there are many gods and many lords-- 6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. 7 It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 8 "Food will not bring us close to God." We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. 9 But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 10 For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? 11 So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. 12 But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

Mark 1:21-28

1:21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 and he cried out, "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."

25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

27 They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching--with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." 28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Sermon 28Jan2024 Mark1.21-28 Authority

Have you ever heard of someone being described as a powerful speaker – or gone to hear someone whose preaching was described as powerful? What does that bring to mind? ... Their strong words, their powerful speaking voice, their clarity of expression, their starting assumptions being the same as your own – or them coming to conclusions that you can really agree with, their smart appearance, personal charisma or spectacular special effects they use, the examples they use to make their point being what you can identify with, their subject matter, their status or qualifications for speaking about their topic?

And of course these days we usually don't go to hear someone speak live. Sometimes we might even have to pay to hear a powerful speaker live, after all. Instead we watch them on a video format of some sort. Does that make much of a difference for you?

And then today even if someone is a 'powerful speaker', how do we consider what they say? Do we just agree with them at the time and file that away as something interesting? Do we just remember them as a person rather than what they actually said? Do we let them influence our thinking and our opinions on the topics they speak about? Do they become a voice that speaks into our lives? How many such voices do we listen to?

When we consider these voices in our lives how do we consider what has authority – what is true – what is worth listening to and letting influence us? Do we re-interpret what we hear to suit us or listen to what the majority think (like the present moves to try and re-interpret the treaty)? Can anyone really tell you what to do or how to live your life? Or do we live like most people would these days - we just all do what we like, and like what we know?

In today's Gospel reading from Mark he describes an incident where authority is the issue. Jesus is described as teaching with authority. Let's get into what is being said here and consider what this might mean for us.

The passage is written in Mark's typical breathless style with 3 'immediately's and 7 'and's, not all of which have been included in the translation we heard today. Mark writes of this happening just after the first disciples have been called – it is a typical sort of event in Jesus' ministry – several others very like it happen in the gospel accounts – but here Mark emphasizes the astonishment that those present have at the authority of Jesus as a teacher.

In fact all through the gospels Jesus is mostly called and addressed as a teacher. When any sort of healing including exorcism happens it is a response to an emergency need. EG in Mark 6 'when Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.' That is his response. What did Jesus teach? Mark doesn't say anything of the content here. However at the very beginning of his Gospel Mark does say that Jesus began to teach the good news of God, that the time has come – the Kingdom of God is at hand and the call to repent and believe the good news. What is noted is that the people are astonished that Jesus doesn't teach like the scribes but as one having authority.

Who were the scribes? The scribes were not just people who wrote out the scriptures but those who were most educated in them and could give the traditional interpretation of them and teach them, the Torah in particular, the instructions of God for life.

The word for authority, *exousia*, is related to the verb *exesti*, meaning "it is free" or "it is permitted." In other words, *exousia* is the freedom of one who acts without hindrance. Jesus' teaching in freedom is contrasted with the teaching of the scribes.

Mark refers to Jesus teaching "as one having authority" and issues a challenge to the scribe's teaching role. Apparently Jesus' teaching style is to interpret the law and speak on behalf of God without engaging in much dialogue about traditions, as the scribes were known to do. The difference is that the scribes' teaching authority depends on their knowledge of and adherence to tradition—especially the traditional interpretation of the Torah. However, Jesus teaches with an independent authority—or rather, on the authority of God (as he says in 11:28-33). Whereas the scribes are bound to tradition, Jesus is relatively free—free in the way that only one who lives directly from and to God's authority is free.

We can find examples of the difference between Jesus' teaching and the teaching of the scribes elsewhere in the gospel accounts. For example, in Mark 12:35-37, Jesus asks why the scribes say the Messiah is the Son of David when Scripture indicates that David called the Messiah "Lord." Scripture itself suggests that the scribes' traditional interpretation is inadequate. Jesus is suggesting that who or what the Messiah is may break the traditional Jewish mold. Again, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus does not hesitate to suggest that the traditional interpretation of the commandments is inadequate. What God demands of us goes far beyond what the scribes require (cf. Matthew 5:20).

Note – this teaching is primarily about how to live and who to follow in what we do, not theology. The scribes gave the traditional view of Torah, God’s instructions for life. Jesus was bringing the Kingdom of God teaching on how to live. With authority he was telling them what to do.

In a worldly sense, Jesus did not have any power at all. He was not a worldly king with political or military power. He was not of the priests, who had the power in Roman Judea. He was not even a scribe with the authority of Jewish tradition. The only authority he had was the supreme confidence that what he did and said was God’s will and God’s truth. His authority lay in the sheer power of his words and in the example of his deeds. His authority lay in his living as God’s servant. Jesus used his authority not to obtain power for himself but to serve humanity (Mark 10:41-45). This is the same kind of *exousia*, freedom, of which Paul speaks in today’s second reading [1 Corinthians 8:9]– freedom exercised for the good of others.

When Jesus teaches and proclaims the Kingdom of God then there is usually conflict. So next comes the interruption to his teaching. The intrusion of the man seems provocative, as if the spirit resents Jesus coming into territory that it would have claimed for its own. Mark’s use of ‘unclean spirit’ is distinctive but is also interchangeable with ‘demon-possessed’; such spirits were thought not to be supernatural beings so much as ghosts of the dead. As with others who are ritually unclean, Jesus has no fear that the presence of this spirit will contaminate him; on the contrary, it is the spirit which appears afraid of him.

As later in Mark 5 and the Gerasene demoniac, it is the spirit rather than the man who initiates the conversation. The phrase ‘What have you to do with us?’ – a semitic phrase ‘What to us and to you?’ is found both in the OT (Judges 11.12, 2 Sam 16.10, 19.22, 1 Kings 17.18) but is also the phrase used by Jesus to discourage his mother in John 2.4, which indicates the strength of that rebuke. The use of Jesus’ name suggests an immediate power play—it was believed that to be able to name someone indicated having power over them. The spirit appears to speak on behalf of all its kind, using a collective plural. Holy One of God is a phrase used of prophets and judges in the OT especially when they were in conflict with evil. So here is this unclean spirit, out of fear, powerfully challenging Jesus.

In contrast to magicians and exorcists of Jesus’ day, there is here no use of spells, formulas, incantations, props or physical manipulations. And there is no sense in which Jesus is offering a performance for the sake of the onlookers or providing a formula for his followers. Even more striking, Jesus does not pray to God, but offers a simple word of powerful rebuke on his own authority. It is not accidental that Mark presents an exorcism as the first miracle in this gospel. He wishes to make evident that Jesus has come to destroy the powers of darkness. His ministry involves waging war on these powers.

If Jesus has been teaching on the Kingdom of God then it is no surprise that Jesus’ hearers connect the action of the exorcism with the content of Jesus’ message. His teaching now has two dimensions to its authority: Jesus speaks on his own behalf, as an authoritative interpreter of the scriptures and of the present moment; and his claims are confirmed by his authoritative word to which powerful spiritual forces submit.

Jesus’ powerful exorcism is a confirmation of his teaching authority. What Jesus teaches is new - unlike the scribes who teach the “same old stuff”—and his (divine) authority to teach is acted out by his deeds of power. – a new teaching with authority – even the unclean spirits obey him, do what he tells them to.

What is happening in exorcism? When Jesus strips the spirits of the ability to inhabit their human hosts, Jesus denies the unclean spirits’ capability to have a settled place of influence in the world. Losing opportunities to win over people’s bodies and minds, they lose the authority they were thought to have. This exorcism, then, does not eliminate evil and oppression; it denies those kinds of forces the authority or power to hold ultimate sway over people’s lives. This enables people to freely do what Jesus teaches.

As elsewhere Jesus' acting in authority brought blessings to people—health and healing (eg in the next passage in Mark 1:23-28). His authority possessed an irresistible power that drew people not through manipulation, but simply by the person that he was and the truth of his own existence. This was not a claim to authority that was necessarily open to being proved true in his own time. To many people of his time, it was anything but obvious that Jesus acted on God's authority. To his opponents, Jesus was a blasphemer. Jesus had to trust that God would vindicate his authority—and, as Christians, we believe that God did vindicate his authority by raising him from the dead.

Just as earlier, Mark emphasises the drama of their response—they are amazed, startled, and astonished. Altogether Mark uses six different words in his accounts to describe the reaction of the crowds to Jesus' teaching. They describe not just incredulity but the kind of panic associated with the disruption of the assumed order of things. Jesus constantly filled people with a mixture of wonder, awe, and fear at what he said and did. And yet the reaction is not belief in the claims Jesus makes about himself, determination to follow him and do as he says and does, but debating amongst themselves, asking one another, 'what is this?'. The wonders in themselves neither force a faith response nor clearly indicate the character of the one performing them.

The debate amongst the people here anticipates the division between those who will accept Jesus and his claims and obey him, and those who (like the unclean spirit) see Jesus' authority as a threat to their own power.

So what is our reaction to the teaching of Jesus? Are we still amazed by Jesus' authority, by his teachings and deeds' potential to upend our assumptions about our world? Do we hear how what he says disrupts our world and challenges the authority of every opposing and evil power? Do we recognize the power of his teaching and seek to read it more and more deeply and over and over again so that we can be more and more influenced by his voice above any other? Or are we a bit threatened by the idea of not choosing for ourselves what to go along with and what not? Do we decide to listen, follow and obey or do we continue in a rebellious spirit to do what we want to do, to live like everyone else.

Even those who heard him first speak, and saw the authentication of the authority of his words, just talked about it among themselves and spread the news of the powerful speaker in the district, a good bit of juicy gossip no doubt. But few at that time actually went on to believe, follow and obey his radical teaching.

Let's make this a year when we resolve to take way more notice of Jesus' teaching than that of any other, to read and re-read the gospel accounts of his teaching in word and action, and seek to follow him every day; to live as he would, not allowing the other authorities of this world to have sway in our lives.

Let's begin our pray in response to this call with the song – Jesus be the centre.