

**28 January 2024**

**Fourth Sunday after Epiphany**

**Mark 1. 21-28**

**Jesus spoke, acted and taught with Authority**

1,175 words

It is often said that there has been “a breakdown of authority”. People no longer believe all the things that were apparently commonly believed and people no longer respect authorities that were apparently considered unquestionable.

I’m not sure this is new; human history seems to have an ebb-and-flow on that, and there have always been times when forms of authority have been questioned.

*[Examples of similar words uttered from recent times through the centuries to BC.]*

But what is authority? Is there a good reason why “authorities” should be trusted and obeyed, whether in the past or now? Perhaps our response depends on the type of authority: Is it elected, inherited, or self-appointed? Is it operating for the good of all – whether in a company, a sports club, a family, a country? Or is it dictatorial, and mainly for the good of the person or group in charge?

A related question is, What gives someone authority? I’m sure we’ve all heard the point made that at the Nuremberg Trials after WW2, many who were in the dock used the defence that they were acting in obedience to authority. Many of those who were convicted of war crimes, who had used that argument, were still pronounced guilty on the grounds that an “authority” should not be obeyed when the orders given are evil.

So perhaps some of the “breakdown of authority” is for very good reasons, that we should not just obey someone because they have a position of authority, but if what they are ordering you to do is right.

This morning’s Gospel reading speaks to this question of authority and gives us some good examples of different ways of understanding it.

*[There’s also the issue of demonic or evil spirits – I’ve spoken on that briefly before, and won’t go deeply into that this morning – I can do so another time.]*

Mark’s gospel frequently states that Jesus was teaching and that the people were “amazed at his teaching” because he spoke “as one with authority” – yet he tells us very little of what Jesus actually said. This passage offers a clue.

The people are amazed at his teaching, then he sets a man free from the grip of evil, and the people are even more amazed at his teaching. That suggests that what is being described is enacted teaching. What Jesus does is a direct follow-on from what he's been saying, and when the people see it happening, they recognise it as more than mere words but as "teaching with authority".

The people are astounded because Jesus "taught them as one having authority." This suggests that Jesus' style of teaching seemed more authoritative than what the people were used to, regardless of what he might be saying. Exactly what this means is a matter of some speculation, but many learned Scripture scholars assist us in an educated guess:

The most common style of the rabbis in Jesus' day was to teach by making continual reference back to earlier authorities, which is called "derived authority".

It is similar to us backing up something by saying, "As Jesus said" or "As Professor Einstein said"; the rabbis would teach by presenting the teachings of authoritative teachers who had gone before them, going back to the revered Moses.

But the impression gained from the gospels is that Jesus didn't usually do that. Instead he just taught, as though the truth of what he said was self-evident. He taught "as one having authority" rather than as one who needed to appeal to an external authority.

A second point in the story where the issue of authority comes up is after Jesus has healed the man. This time it is the teaching itself that is described as having authority. When Jesus speaks, things happen, sometimes dramatically. Jesus speaks to the people, and we assume that his message is one of freedom from the oppression of evil. Then the people see that this is not just words but something that has immediate impact in their midst, and they identify it as a teaching that has authority.

The focus on Jesus' authority is related to what he says and does, not to him wearing a uniform or a badge. There is no suggestion that Jesus has authority because he is an ordained Rabbi, or because he has been anointed by God as the Messiah. People do not listen to him because he has been vested with authority; instead, they declare him to have authority because they have listened to him and found what he said to be authoritative. His authority is earned.

Once the people have concluded that he has authority, they would be even more willing to take note of what he says, but the initial conclusion regarding his authority is earned, not assumed. It is earned by the fact that his message is a message of freedom and hope, backed up by people actually being set free at his word and touch.

For a contrasting model of authority, in his Letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul addresses a misuse of authority and strongly states the priority of love over knowledge: “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” You could say that he is asserting the priority of love over truth.

Truth handled with no concern for the rule of love can be hurtful and destructive, the opposite of what we saw in Jesus. Paul is pointing out that just because something is true doesn’t mean that it will be freeing and up-building for everyone. In the hands of those who lack wisdom, maturity and compassion, truth can be wielded arrogantly and oppressively. Paul is clear in his statements: being right comes a distant second to being loving.

There are some contrasting images of authority in these passages. Two of the most frequently used models of authority are discredited. We see Jesus moving away from authority based simply on established office:

“I’m the Rabbi here, therefore, listen to me!”

Or an appeal to established tradition:

“I’m quoting the experts, therefore listen to me.”

We read the words of Paul criticising people claiming authority based on nothing more than the ability to prove oneself right:

“I can win the argument, therefore listen to me.”

... and all the more so when it is devoid of love.

**Some questions for further thought:**

- What are some examples you have witnessed where those who held positions of authority acted in ways which failed to bring hope or wholeness to people?
- What are some examples you have witnessed where someone – maybe even someone without any official position – showed themselves to have a genuine Christ-like authority by the way their words and actions set others free and built them up?
- How do I, how do we, assert authority, in our public and private lives?

The model of authority that stands up to the scrutiny of these Readings is that which is earned by wise and compassionate sharing of knowledge and power, and that brings hope, healing and freedom from what would otherwise oppress or harm people.

~~~~~