

As one having authority

For a second week we find ourselves in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel, where we now find Jesus visiting a synagogue in a Galilean town called Capernaum. And as we read what takes place here we become aware of what has in fact been a theme running right through this chapter, and that is the extraordinary authority of this Jesus of Nazareth who has appeared on the scene. It is as if in presenting Jesus to us the very first feature that Mark wants to draw our attention to is his authority.

So, Mark begins by introducing us to John the Baptist who is not without authority himself, having been sent directly by God as God's messenger. But whatever authority he has pales in comparison with the one who will come after him 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me: I am not worthy to stoop and untie the thong of his sandals...' Then Jesus himself appears and we watch him being baptised and we hear a voice from heaven declare, 'you are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.' Well, there is some pretty impressive ascription of authority, surely, if in this figure we have nothing less than God's Son, the Beloved. And then as the chapter continues Jesus is driven into the wilderness to have his authority tested by the devil: who will prove stronger, Jesus or Satan? Then last Sunday we thought about what happens next, as Jesus calls fishermen to leave their nets and to follow him. What was odd there was the way in which those fishermen simply dropped everything and left. There is no indication at all that they had encountered Jesus before, that they had heard him preach or spoken to him, and yet on the command, 'Follow me!' they drop everything – nets, occupation, family ties – and do as they are told. And last week I was suggesting that at least in part this was just a miracle, that the Spirit of God entered into these fishermen and prompted them to respond, a direct divine intervention. But perhaps another way of thinking of it would be in terms of authority: when he calls the fishermen they don't hesitate, they don't ask questions – they just do as they are told!

Well, now we move to Capernaum and we read that Jesus enters the synagogue and taught and in keeping with this theme running through the chapter we read, 'They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes...' Just listening to this man teach was jaw-dropping. People had never heard anything like it. Unlike the scribes who taught in the synagogue, endlessly debating the ancient traditions, expounding the texts of Judaism and quoting and cross-quoting other scribes and teachers, Jesus offered something fresh and compelling – something authoritative. And the people lapped it up. They were spellbound.

Then, however, there comes this interruption. A frenzied, abrasive voice suddenly screams 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.' Jesus' presence provokes a strong reaction from within the synagogue, a spiritual reaction, by this figure with an unclean spirit. And note that what is taking place here is a clash of authority, a stand-off over ultimate authority. The synagogue, after all, was an authoritative place. Here the learned religious experts, the scribes, sat on their special seat and read and expounded the ancient texts. They considered that they had the key to the Scriptures and therefore the key to life. The scribes and their authority lay at the very heart of local village life, as here people were socialised and taught how to live as God's people. The man with the unclean spirit, however, resents Jesus' presence and the authority he represents. And no wonder he shouts Jesus' name, for in those days to know someone's name was to have power and authority over them, and this man is therefore asserting himself over Jesus, putting Jesus in his place. But Jesus here shows who has ultimate authority. 'Be silent and come out of him!', he commands, and the man is thrown into convulsions and delivered. Hence the conclusion, 'what is this? A new teaching – what authority!' The synagogue has witnessed a clash of authorities – and Jesus has prevailed.

So Mark wants to introduce Jesus to us by stressing his authority, and this is interesting in our contemporary world where the whole question of authority is a deeply vexed and troubling one. Authority is a far from uncontentious issue. Historically we live in a post-Enlightenment era and one crucial feature of that 17th century movement that we call the Enlightenment was a questioning of authority, not least religious authority and the way it was exercised over society. That period of the Enlightenment promoted reason and the scientific method of empirical observation and testing as the all-important authority for human life – everything else was suspect. But of course for society to function there have to be other recognised authorities as well to give political and social and moral shape to the lives that we lead – human community requires the structuring of authority. And this is not the time or place to recount how, especially since the 1960s, we have witnessed massive suspicion towards and resistance to such authorities, largely because so many of the bastions of the establishment that were supposed to exercise authority have been so utterly discredited and shown to have feet of clay. Wherever there is power and

authority it seems that sooner or later financial or sexual malpractice raise their ugly heads, and once again authority finds itself disgraced. And you know all this stuff only too well, how the recent surge of populism, and a particular brand of nationalism, have fed off a resentment against elites and power cliques who serve and reinforce their own interests and are unaccountable to and out of touch with ordinary people. And all this represents a crisis in authority, and we can understand why so many are baffled that anyone can continue to espouse religious faith. Hasn't religion been shown to be conclusively corrupt and oppressive? Why on earth, in our modern world, would anyone want to needlessly submit to its spirit-crushing authority? Do we need the kind of authority religion represents, a kind of over-arching authority to which human life is beholden? Is not subservience to such authority a part of our race's infancy which we have grown out of?

Well, here I want us to look a little more closely at Jesus' authority and what form it takes, because it may just be of a rather distinct kind. And the first thing to note is that while his authority here is as a teacher, yet the strange thing is that Mark provides us with very little of the content of Jesus' teaching. Yes, we're told that he comes to the synagogue and that people are amazed that he spoke with such authority – but what did he actually say? We don't know - we're not told! And while we do find some teaching in Mark's Gospel, there's not as much as we might expect given that for Mark 'teacher' is a favourite title for Jesus. Mark seems to be more interested in Jesus as teacher than what he actually taught. But the other interesting thing to note is that whenever Mark refers to Jesus as 'teacher' there usually follows not a description of what he said, but something pretty miraculous that he did. Like here in the synagogue, where the portrayal of him as teacher is accompanied by him freeing this man of his unclean spirit. In fact it seems that whenever Jesus is called teacher you'd better fasten your seat belt because something dramatic is about to happen. There's an occasion just a couple of chapters further on when the disciples are caught in a storm in a boat and they're terrified and they cry out to Jesus. But they don't cry, 'Jesus, Messiah, don't you care that we're perishing?' or 'Jesus, Son of God....' No, they cry out 'Jesus, *teacher*, don't you care...?' And what do they expect the teacher to do – preach a sermon to the storm? Well, what Jesus does is to silence the storm, just as he silenced the man in the synagogue. And a little later on Jesus is described as 'teacher' when he raises a young girl from death, and again when he feeds a hungry crowd, and again when he cures an epileptic. People seem to call Jesus 'teacher' not when they want a seminar or a sermon bit when they want help – want Jesus to do something.

In other words, where his disciples learn from this teacher is not in the seclusion of the synagogue or the seminar room but in following Jesus around, as he encounters demoniacs and storm-tossed fishermen and sick people. Learning from this teacher is done on the job, in the mix and turmoil and nitty-gritty of everyday life. Learning the teaching comes from hanging out with the teacher and getting to know him – that's education Jesus-style, and it's not primarily cerebral but practical. This is a particular kind of education that is often associated with apprenticeships. It's based upon the idea that you learn not from having your head stuffed with teaching in a vacuum but you learn from a master, an expert, by being with them and they with you and as you get to know them instruction accompanies action. This is the whole notion of discipleship and it's how Jesus operated his ministry and trained up his followers. But this is also a different model of authority. Here the teacher does not simply sit above the pupil dispensing truth. That is a very hierarchical model of learning. No, this teacher comes alongside us and walks with us, entering with us into the matrix of life, revealing truth as it emerges in different contexts and imparting wisdom. And the content of the teaching is inseparable from the character of the teacher. This is a different kind of authority.

Dealing with this first chapter of Mark, with its call of the first disciples at the lakeshore and now this incident in the synagogue, I am reminded of the famous words of the great missionary Albert Schweitzer, writing of Jesus and his call and his authority. Schweitzer writes, "He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is." That is how he comes to us, sharing his life with ours.

In our confused and conflicted world we have not outgrown our need for authority, indeed we cry out for it. But it's not the authority of one who comes to Lord Himself over us. It's the authority of the Master who calls us to come and to walk with him, to learn from him who is gentle and humble of heart – and who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Amen.

O holy and loving God,
Eternal God, Creator and Maker of all,
we bless and praise your holy name.
We praise you for the beauty and splendour of the world
you have given us,
for the joys of human life,
for all that enriches and seasons our days here on earth.
O God in Jesus Christ you have come among us as teacher,
speaking with authority and showing us how to live.
You have given us commands that free us,
you have given us promises that reassure us,
you have given us wisdom with which to discern life's mysteries.
Forgive us we pray when we reject your truth.
Forgive us when we reject your authority
and seek to live on our own terms.
Have mercy upon us we pray and forgive us
and call us back to faithfulness and trust in you.
Call us once more as disciples and let us
Rise up and follow you and learn from you,
That we may live fully and well.
We pray in Jesus' name and in his words we pray together,
Saying...