

Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time 2018

Melanie Clark

Mark 1; 21-28

'What is this? A new teaching - with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him'.

— Words from our gospel reading, St Mark, the first chapter and the twenty-seventh verse.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

They were amazed at Jesus's new teaching – with authority! So amazed that the news of it spread like wildfire.

But what does authority mean here? And what do we mean by authority? Who would we consider authoritative? Parliament? The Queen? The church? The Prime Minister? The Bishop? A teacher, a football

referee, a parent? You might think that the pulpit confers authority, but as an Ordinand I am in the interesting position of having no authority whatsoever. I am obliged to accept the authority of lots of others, and simply to do what I am told (don't suppose that was ever the case with Fr Peter though).

Although the Gospel today described Jesus teaching in the Capernaum synagogue, Mark shows little interest in what he said. His interest is in Jesus' authority. But the meaning of the Greek is not totally clear. The RSV, which we heard today reads: "What is this? A new teaching [exclamation mark] With authority he commands even the unclean spirits." So the emphasis is on Jesus' authority over the exorcism. The NRSV, on the other hand, which, as a theology student I am obliged to use under the authority of the University of Oxford, says:

"What is this? A new teaching—with authority [exclamation mark] He commands even the unclean

spirits”. Here the emphasis is on Jesus’ teaching. Either way, the story as a whole show us that both Jesus’ teaching and his miraculous powers have their basis in his authority.

C. S. Lewis wrote, ‘Don't be scared by the word authority. Believing things on authority only means believing them because you've been told them by someone you think trustworthy.’ It could be argued that much of what we believe, we believe taken on authority. To give an example, I believe that the TV series, Game of Thrones is about sex and dragons. I’ve never seen it, but I believe this to be true as I’ve heard it on ‘good authority’. So - authority is often the necessary bridge to believing. It asks for a leap of faith on the basis of trust. This is what Jesus’ authority asks of us – to trust and believe in something new, radical and beyond our worldly knowledge.

Mark tells us about the authority of Jesus by contrasting it with the scribes. The gospel states that Jesus 'taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes'. These scribes presented by Mark were teachers and experts in Law. They had great power and authority in the synagogue, but Jesus' authority was different. Mark frequently uses the scribes in contrast with Jesus, and that contrast casts a spotlight on the one whose authority should truly concern us. The scribes have an authority which is worldly and human, whilst Jesus' authority is divine. Jesus as the Messiah speaks the words of God, but the scribes – for all their legal expertise – can only teach the traditions of human beings.

The reaction to the exorcism emphasizes this contrast. In response to the miracle the crowd 'were all amazed and kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching - with authority'. For the people, the power exercised by Jesus over the demon legitimates his

teaching. By having the observers refer to his ‘new’ teaching, Mark redirects the focus of the story away from the supernatural act, and towards the divine authority it presupposes: in word and in deed, Jesus is a teacher whose teaching reveals who he is, and the divine authority he possesses.

At the point of exorcism, the evil spirit identifies Jesus as the ‘Holy One of God’. Throughout Mark’s Gospel, Jesus hides his identity, asking those who know it to keep quiet, and silencing those, like the evil spirit, who proclaim it. But there is more to say. It is the evil spirit, and not the learned group of scribes, who recognize Jesus’ divine authority and reveal his true identity. ‘I know who you are, the Holy One of God’. Jesus is known as the one set apart, consecrated by God. His authority comes from not what he has learned but from who he is – the Messiah.

Why should this demon, and not the human powers that be, recognize Jesus' divine authority? The whole of Mark's gospel gives us the answer. Jesus' concern for secrecy only lasts so long. At the end of the gospel, in the presence of his enemies, when all have abandoned him: in the moment of absolute weakness and passivity, the High Priest asks Jesus 'Are you the Messiah?' And then, and only then, Jesus says 'I am'. The worldly authorities hear him pronounce his true identity, and they condemn him to death. They fail to see and to understand, even when the truth is made plain. The truth of divine identity stands before them, plain to see, and they respond by putting that truth to death: they still didn't see, they still couldn't hear, they still didn't know Him even as he stood and spoke among them.

What does this subversion of authority tell us, as we continue to rely on worldly authority in its many forms? What has parliament or a parent or a preacher

to do with the ultimate authority to which Mark is drawing our attention? What does authority mean to us as Christians?

Mark's gospel tells us that true authority comes from Christ and not from human power. It is not found in Jesus' knowledge and learning, but in who he is and what he does as the one set apart, the Son of God.

Mark is telling us, I think, that sometimes human, worldly authority and power can blind us, as it did the scribes, from seeing the truth. The demon could see it but the people couldn't.

What does this tell us about what it is to have Christian authority?

As Christians, called to serve God as his disciples we too have a kind of divine authority. And with it, God is calling us to see past all the established structures of power and authority in the world that can leave us blinkered from the truth. Like Mark, we need to look

past what is worldly to what is divine - and put a spotlight on Christ.

Not in what we know, but in who we are and in what we do, we can witness to our faith and encourage others to trust us as a good authority. Authority - in this sense then - can reside in the parent, the football referee, The Queen, the teacher, in the Vicar, the judge, the doctor, the owner. But also in the worker, and in the learner, and in the defendant, and in the patient, and in the victim, and in the pupil, and in the child. In you, and all that you do as a Christian. And even, *maybe even* In the Ordinand. **Amen.**