

Sermon for 28th January 2018

When I was growing up, the power of authority held a very different position in everyday life than it does today.

For example, at school the authority of the teacher was more or less unquestionable. It was rarely challenged.

For example, if the teacher sent you to the office to face the head master, or metered out punishment that kept you in after class or denied you time for lunch– it was generally thought that you deserved it. My own parents would say – if they found out about any punishment I received, *Well you must have done something to deserve it.*

There was the same sort of response when one would read in the paper about someone being questioned in relation to crime– generally it was thought that the person must have done something wrong for the authorities to question him or her. For young and old, you might say we were guilty until proven otherwise.

Thankfully, there came a dramatic change from this autocratic model in our culture in the 60's when everything from the people's rights to the country's decision making, was challenged – called into question. There was a huge shift in the power of authority.

Those of us from that era might recall the song by bob Dylan “the times they are a changing.” How I loved that song. Especially the part that said, *your sons and your daughters are beyond your command!* How I loved those lyrics.

Now I think it is a good thing that we challenge authority, and that we no longer just accept things without question, however I also believe that a culture that encourages negative criticism – perhaps even driven by personal agendas, rather than thoughtful comment, is not a good thing.

Such self-focus and scepticism results in an inability to trust others, and an inability to believe in much at all, especially in other people or in what we read and hear. There is more than one person in the world who believes in the reality that fake people relate fake news.

Speaking with authority is something that is rare these days, hence when I was reading today's gospel I thought how wonderful it is to be able to depend upon the authority of Jesus Christ in our lives in these very uncertain and sceptical times.

So what can we learn about the way of authority that Jesus had and still shares with us, in the gospel today.

The story takes place in the synagogue – Jesus entered and taught.

They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

The gospel story provides us with something very precious – it provides a contrast – something to compare – Jesus had authority that the audience had not experienced before. The scribes did not – they taught in a very different way.

So what can we learn from these comparative teaching methods.

Now we understand Jesus Word to be authoritative, and we recall here the opening words and verses of John's gospel; *In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God...and the word became flesh and lived among us... full of grace and truth.*

Jesus authority is in the Word without doubt –yet there is something more – Jesus authority is also in the deeds that he does.

Now this is highlighted in today's gospel story. Mark has interwoven into the references to Jesus as an authoritative teacher, the story of an exorcism thus portraying Jesus as powerful in both word and deed. Jesus authority was one born out of relational wholeness - holiness.

We see this clearly in how Jesus deals with the demon possessed man in the gospel story. He first silences the demon and then frees the man from its bondage. The power of his authority is the power of mercy and love which heals, cleanses, serves and forgives; it is not a power which dominates, oppresses, chains and isolates.

Now the scribes on the other hand taught very differently. They were the literate elite of scholars- lawyers who represented the Jerusalem priestly rulers. They were set above most. We might say they were - *puffed up* - in the way Paul uses the term in the Epistle.

Their mode of teaching involved appeals to scripture and that which was connected to the law. Their very authority was based on the Law of Moses, and Moses himself, as we hear in the reading from Deuteronomy this morning, prophesies that there will be raised up someone like himself, and God will put his words into his mouth and he shall tell them all that I command him.

In the synagogue that day at Capernaum, Jesus as the fulfilment of this prophesy, amazed them with the power of authority that they had never seen before. *What is this?* they said, *a new teaching – with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.* And his fame spread before him throughout Galilee.

The question for us is: Does the power and authority of Jesus Christ still amaze us today? Or has the gloss been worn away through familiarity or scepticism?

Now when we answer positively to this question, as I'm sure we do – we are to follow the example of Jesus' teaching. For if we are to speak with authority in the power of God and to be listened to, and trusted, then this God-given authority must be backed up by merciful action, otherwise it will be empty of love and will fall away.

If we are to teach and preach a meaningful message in this sceptical age, then what we say, not only has to be well reasoned but it has to be demonstrated by the way we live and act in the likeness of Jesus Christ – who is the very Author of life.

The Lord be with you.

