

St German's Cathedral (hall). Epiphany 4, 10.30 p.m. 2024 - Mark 1: 21-28 "... he taught them as one having authority..."

The nature of authority is one that was probably as much debated in our Lord's day as it is today. Politically it is hard for us to reckon with some of the things happening in the nations of the world, where majority opinions are over-ridden and critical decisions affecting millions of people bring wars, crucial climate decisions, suppression due to ethnic and other reasons and all of these things leading to the vulnerable fleeing their homes and seeking safety elsewhere. Authority by nature of office is one thing and it is what we are often reflecting on when someone in a position of power is using that power with a decisive action, whilst the exit strategy ultimately requires months, if not years of debate and diplomacy.

Then there is the other sort of authority that comes with or often without high office: an authority perceived and acknowledged subjectively because of a person's charisma or recognised wisdom. This may also produce a commanding leadership, but it is quite another thing because it comes with public support, often overwhelming. Authority because of status, and authority because of charisma were part of the inner debate of the people of Jesus' day about how he was the Christ, the chosen of God, or not, as many in the Sanhedrin and amongst the chief priests imagined. Now, it could be said that the miracle story recorded by St John, at the marriage feast at Cana, which we heard last Sunday, is substantially concerning the authority of Christ, as well as this morning's

Gospel story from Mark. In a way it is understandable too, both from the structure of the Gospel accounts as well as the actual stage of life of Jesus as his ministry opens up and becomes public and increasingly transparent.

One day, early in the ministry of Jesus a seed was being sown in the synagogue in Capernaum. It was a small village beside the Lake in Galilee. The remains of the synagogue are still there, showing a substantial building which formed the backdrop of the reading this morning. It was here according to Mark, that Jesus went on the first Sabbath after calling the fishermen, Simon and Andrew, James and John, and where he taught with authority. - the authority of one who lived and breathed the Spirit of God. The people saw it and heard it, and understood that this was no ordinary rabbi.

Mark tells us in these verses that there was a man in the synagogue that day who was deeply troubled in spirit. He cried out in the midst of the gathering, acknowledging the fact that Jesus was “the Holy One of God”, but also asking the question, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” This acknowledgment of authority, but challenge to that authority, is met with a rebuke from our Lord. It heightens the sense that the place of Jesus was to be to bring release and peace to the hearts of individuals and their distress, but at the same time, and in consequence, to disrupt and confront the evil that was bringing about the disturbance and distress that so many were experiencing, and are still experiencing today. Jesus heals the man, showing that his authority lay not just in his words

but in his actions too - this added to the amazement of the crowd, and all said, “What is this? A new teaching! With authority....”

The answer to this questioning is the thing of the moment for the crowds as they witnessed one after another incident of healing or release, and it is easy for us to see this as we cast our eyes over the verses of St Mark from Chapter 1 verse 14, before we started the Gospel reading today, right through to chapter 3 verse 6. Staying in a house with Simon, Jesus first heals his mother-in-law, then the many who were brought to that house with all manner of sickness and the first chapter ends with the healing of a man with leprosy. Chapter 2 gives us the story of the paralysed man lowered down through the roof, and Jesus pronounces him forgiven and healed, he calls Levi from the tax office, eats at his house, and goes on to speak of new wine in new wineskins and the Son of man as Lord of the Sabbath. The section ends at the beginning of chapter 3 with the healing of the man with the withered hand.

Taken all in all, our Lord’s authority is shown again and again, and as if to underline it, the last verse Mark writes in this section reads, “The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.” But it started in the synagogue in Capernaum; Sabbath prayers, Scripture reading and exposition. Jesus is conforming to the mode of religious teaching in his day. But the significant point that we see from the verses of today’s Gospel is that the authority that Jesus demonstrates is in word and miracle.

There is a strong tradition that God's activity is most surely seen in this way; in a way that cannot entirely be grasped with the mind, but breaks through the silence and declares God's power and authority to all who witness its mysterious work. So Mark will note Jesus calling for silence, but still the activity of God cannot be hidden; and he emphasises too; that 'all' see this, and such is *to* 'all' Galilee. This emphasis on "all" is another feature of this section of the Gospel account. So Mark helps us to feel what he and the other followers of Jesus were experiencing: being overwhelmed by the authority of Christ and the power of God displayed in miracle and word.

This is a reminder, in case we need it, that the very humanity of Christ is the vital lens for us in glimpsing in a living and inspiring hope that his words and works are the source of our daily reflection, prayer and discipleship. The lesson this leaves us with as we grapple with these issues today, is not to underestimate, or, in our own day, fail to see the full authority of our Lord being displayed. Liturgically, we acknowledge this by standing for the Gospel reading at the Eucharist, as in word, miracle, parable and action Christ's very presence enlightened the dull of sight, and challenged the inspired to understand the source of the authority displayed.

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