

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Mark 1:21-22

We live in a time when there are self-proclaimed ‘authorities’ on nearly every topic you can think of, from gardening to diets, to world economics and everything in between.

It doesn’t take much to become an authority. What makes it interesting is that authorities can disagree with one another.

They aren’t interested in listening to anyone else’s ideas. They are often manipulating and don’t care if we take their advice or not. They often forget what humility is, and don’t know how to admit that another person might have an idea equally as good as theirs. And so, quite rightly, we become sceptical and cynical of so-called authorities.

Today’s Gospel reading from Mark tells us about Jesus’ first time preaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. We are not told what Scripture He read, or what He said about the Scripture reading, but it certainly left an impression. We are told, “The people who heard Him were amazed at the way He taught, for He wasn’t like the teachers of the Law”. It’s clear that the people there that day had heard many people speak about the Scriptures before, and maybe about the very passage that Jesus had read, but there was something different about the way Jesus spoke.

You see when the teachers of the Law, and other experts, spoke, they referred to other rabbis, elders, professors and teachers of the Scriptures as authorities to back up their explanation of the passage they were reading.

However, Jesus was different, He spoke with authority, He was the authority. He didn't need to refer to any other experts and authorities.

I'm sure there might have been some who were more astounded and shocked than amazed. Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, and what good can come from Nazareth, had just broken the long-held tradition of quoting the much respected teachers of the Torah, but there was no getting around the fact that "He taught with authority".

Mark uses that word 'authority' a lot in his Gospel. Here already in Chapter One, Mark establishes that Jesus has an authority that is different than every other human authority.

Jesus has authority over sickness, death, nature, and even Satan. On occasions when people witness Jesus' authority they are left asking the question, "Who is this man?" They have never seen anything like it before.

So, what does all this have to say to us today? How do we, who are so cynical about authority and people who claim to speak with authority, deal with someone who speaks with such absolute authority in our present world? This can be a real problem for some people who are not used to someone speaking with such certainty and absolute authority. We live in a society where almost anything goes, and to hear someone say, "I am the only way to eternal life, and only those who live and believe in me will live forever", comes across as being offensive.

But regardless of how offensive this might sound, the truth is the truth, and still needs to be spoken. As time went on during Jesus' time on earth, many were cynical about Jesus' authority to speak the way He did, or to do what He did, but He had so much to tell those who were hungry to hear God's Word, that He couldn't be stopped.

Jesus said with authority, “I am the Light of the world”. Other religious leaders and prophets have claimed to be divine lights shining in our world, but only Jesus can back it up with authority. Only He can give us security; only He can guide us, only He can help us through the darkest storms; only He can light up the path that leads to peace and joy even though everything is going crazy; only He can show us the path to eternal life; only He can say it and mean it. He is the Son of God, once nailed to a cross, now ruling and reigning in heaven.

He is the greatest authority there is in Eternity
With authority Jesus says, “If you remain faithful to my teachings you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”. What He is saying is that if we are faithful, we will be free from fear, nagging guilt, discouragement and hopelessness. We will be free from death, and the door will be open to life forever. Jesus told many parables, and talked a lot about the Kingdom of God and what it means to live in the Kingdom of God.

Sometimes His words were comforting and gracious, reminding us of the goodness and mercy of our heavenly Father, and sometimes He spoke words of warning and judgement, reminding us that it’s too easy to forget God’s ways and follow the ways of the world. His word is still as powerful today, and comes with the same authority as if He were here speaking it in person.

When you hear the words, “Your sins are forgiven” it is true. It’s spoken with authority, regardless of whose lips are speaking those words.

When we read, “I will be with you always” it’s true for us, regardless of the state of our mind or body at the time. When someone reads to us Jesus’ words, “I am leaving you with a gift, peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world

cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid", this is His word of authority for us and He means it.

When we hear, "This is my body and blood given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins", this is His word of promise to us that what was achieved on the cross is ours. We are God's children, loved, forgiven, heirs of heaven, this is Jesus' word of authority to us.

We don't need to go through the whole of Scripture to emphasise that our Christian faith is not some pie in the sky wishful thinking, but is based on God's amazing words of authority. When Jesus speaks He always speaks with the human condition in mind. He speaks with love, because He knows we all need forgiveness, and without forgiveness, we have no way of entering heaven.

In times of trouble we cling to the word of Christ. It has authority and promises us the help we need, that only God can give. When we listen to the word, and cling to it, we will be amazed, just like the people gathered in the Capernaum synagogue on that day when Jesus spoke.

AMEN.