

Sermon Epiphany 4

**Deuteronomy 18:15-20, 1 Corinthians 7:32-35,
Mark 1:21-28**

Authority in word and action.

There is of course much on-going passionate debate about the nature of teaching and learning at this current time. The closure of schools and universities to physical and face to face teaching and learning to most children and students has caused much work and stress to Parents, children students and teacher. Online remote learning is blended or completely substituted for normal physical and face to face learning. I will not rehearse all the problems here for Parents at home balancing work with home schooling, for teachers devising the best ways to enabling learning and for children and students results and psychological well-being. In this parish it is not just a remote conundrum but affects myself with our school commitments and many of our families very deeply. There are some children whose attainment has improved but this is not true for others and there are many costs – not least in time stress and mental welfare, for all involved.

Jesus is a Rabbi which means as you know “teacher” and Mark in his gospel is both a storyteller and teacher who desires to bring the Good News of who this teacher is. Mark is a direct and indirect witness to Jesus in action as Rabbi and more for He is not just a teacher but is the Word made flesh – as mark makes clear in the first line of his gospel “ The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”.

The challenge to those being taught is huge – there is no background stuff no getting to know you –

Mark is straight in to the heart of the syllabus – will you have ears to hear or not? It will become a familiar phrase.

Ironically you might think, Mark is light on the actual content of Jesus Teaching, light on parables no sermon on the mount – he teaches with Authority but we are not told much of what he taught. He is not alone in this. An analysis of St.Paul's letters will not reveal much of the teaching of Jesus. For St.Paul we have the Scriptures – the Old Testament for that – what is lacking is the mind of Christ the Mind of Christ to truly understand what has already been given. St.Mark echoes this by beginning with Isaiah. St.Mark hearers will have been familiar with content of Jesus's teaching and echo but still unclear as to as St.Mark put it here today "what it all meant" they constantly have ears and listen but do not hear.

You may hear a good sermon or speech but what do you remember – something maybe but its effect it has on you that really lasts and matter – it is what Neville Ward that great Methodist preacher and writer called conveying God through personality without allowing the personality to be the subject. In the person of Christ, object and subject are the same, personality is all. But those who hear and see are not mere bystanders but of the very same stuff and to be drawn into the life of God in the same way. The redemption of the person not the offering of a teaching guide for life is found here.

Authority is the key word today and it is key to how our personality is to be formed and reformed – who and what has authority over us and within us a people. There are many words for authority used in the gospel – power, beginning, source, rule etc.

Our English word comes from the Latin more than Greek and of course authority and author are linked and draw together some the variety of the Greek.

We recognise that there is a difference between authority and power – you could set it as this weeks online distanced learning for year 11 – discuss authority and power by reference to the Prime Minister and the Monarch in Contemporary Britain.

I recall many observation of the interplay of authority and power in my life. In church – we will sing the poetry of George Herbert as we bring ordinary gifts of bread and wine to the Altar. Eternal wisdom and authority comes in ordinary. Can you tell me who was Archbishop wielding power over this quiet rural priest – no of course we can't. It is never those who wield power over us but those in which we see authority that shape us and remake us. I can recall an American colonel asking me the name of the general giving the regional operational briefing for our campaign in Afghanistan. It went something like this – *he's not a general he's just a major – well he's good but why's he doing this – because he wrote the plan.* He had authority because he was the author and those who had power over him also had humility. The Colonel was unconvinced despite his observation: *Well I dunno – we wouldn't allow that.*

In Christ authority and power are united but his authority does not derive from power but from who he is, he is the author of life – he is from the beginning. Fast forward to the end of Mark the Crucifixion in Mark is the most powerless and forsaken of all and yet as he breathes his last the curtain of the temple is torn in two and he is revealed as Son of God.

Recognition in Mark is often not of this world – in today’s story it is the unclean spirit that recognises Jesus and called him by name. Doing such, calling by name is the biblical way of holding power (authority) over another but not over Jesus – you cannot have power over the source and author of life. The word for Authority used here is *Exousia* – *out of substance*. The man’s substance is of God, and his image, the man’s substance is not to be defined by what possessed him. Jesus restores the substance of this man. What imprisons and possesses us is more often deep within and of the same – yet we often resort to external cause and remedy thinking exorcism a little impolite. Mark notes well Jesus of Nazareth repeatedly seeing the person God has made and intends, and not what the person has become. He doesn’t just draw out an unclean spirit but the substance of the true person.

So in this little excerpt authority is recognised in what Jesus Says but importantly what he does too. Observing authority at work, which has power but is not derived from the exercise of power, is a fascinating and fruitful exercise for the Christian or disciple of Jesus. Observe well, like Mark in words few. It will tell us who and what, has authority over us and who and what possesses us. Mark observes the word and action of Christ, sees the substance of all life, and invites us to the same.

*The Revd Fr. David Wylie RN
St. Margaret of Antioch
Leigh-on-Sea*