

Mark 1: 21-28

St. Aidan's 9 a.m./Wesley 10:30

(Deuteronomy 18: 15-20)

01/02/09

As One with Authority

Mark tells us that, when Jesus preached his first sermon, the people “were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having *authority*...” [Mark 1.22, emphasis mine] And I’m thinking “Hey, I’ll have what he’s having please!” What an incredibly wonderful accolade for the preached Word that one descriptive noun is: *authority*!

My own yearning for it reminds me of the cartoon I saw some years ago in an American religious journal. The minister is at his desk, head in his hands and looking very glum. On the wall behind him is a large graph of church attendance which shows that attendance was on a steady increase before he arrived, and has been in a plummeting decline ever since. The woman wearing a Duty Elder badge is saying, “Well, Pastor, it might help if you didn’t end *every* sermon by saying, ‘But, then, who am I to know? I could be wrong’.” While there is a real and pressing need for appropriate humility—perhaps especially in preachers—a steady diet of self-deprecation can be wearying for preachers and listeners alike. The reality is that we also need a sense of genuine *authority*. How do we get that?

An interesting question that is—how authority is to be obtained. Genuine authority requires the discipline of hard work—and no title or status or official position alone will ever substitute for that. In more contemporary language, until we ‘walk the walk’ we may as well not ‘talk the talk.’

Which brings me to the authority of scripture. Recent surveys of the attitudes of church-going Christians indicate that a large majority of us believe in the ‘authority of scripture,’ though we have some distinct differences in defining exactly what that means. For some there is a firm adherence to a literal reading of the Bible as the dictated words of God—always worrying because of the questions of translation and interpretation. For others there is a less rigorous and more creative idea of how scripture becomes the Word of God through the work of scholars and preachers—also worrying because of questions about human frailty, history, literature and tradition. But most worrying of all is that the same surveys indicate that, whatever our views on the authority of scripture, the vast majority of church-going Christians do neither engage in any serious study of the Bible, nor even read it on a regular basis. Most of us depend on what happens on Sunday mornings to give us all we need to know.

Well, that sure puts the pressure on! No wonder I'm yearning for some feeling of authority! Not just for my sake but for yours too! How can we claim the authority of scripture if we don't know what we are talking about? So right now, today, we are going to take a few minutes together for some Bible study. While the lectionary still draws our attention to the first chapter of Mark's gospel, let's indulge in an exercise that I think will help us all to enjoy the rest of this gospel as the year progresses. I have done this with other congregations over the years, and it has gotten good response—so I'm reasonably confident to try this here too.

As a framework for our thinking, I want to give you four key words for the reading of Mark's gospel. If you have a pen to write them down on the order of service—or if you have a good memory—you will go to the top of the class, as there will be a test in a few minutes. These words are: **simplicity, secrecy, surprise and speed.**

Simplicity

- This is, by far, the shortest of all the gospels.
- Everything in it happens in the present tense—very basic conversational Greek rather than the more refined literary style of, for instance, Luke. Good English translations are also in basic English.
- Many scholars believe this points to an author who is a young person, literate but not well-educated—and most accept that the likely author is John Mark (who was also just called 'Mark'), the young missionary companion of Barnabas and Paul mentioned in the book of Acts.
- The style of the gospel may also point to an original context of readers and hearers who were also not of the intellectual elite. Because of the particular journeys that we think John Mark went on as a missionary, it's likely that he was writing for Jewish Christian churches in the areas we now call Turkey, Greece and Cyprus—and that he was writing for the purpose of teaching new converts the basic story of Jesus.
- The narrative is efficient—clear, moving, but not repetitive or overly wordy or philosophical (like, for instance, The Gospel of John is).
- There are very few references to scripture, compared to the other gospels—another clue to the educational level of the author and original audience.
- But this gospel's **simplicity** is not in any way a detriment to its importance or its beauty; in fact the simplicity itself continues to make this gospel uniquely valuable.

Secrecy

- The identity of Jesus is a matter of some mystery. There are no birth narratives in this gospel, and even the words ‘son of God’ that appear in the first verse are thought to have been added by a later editor.
- The title of ‘Christ’ is given but not explained at first.
- Jesus himself counsels people ‘not to tell’ when they realise who he is—as happens in today’s reading.
- Jesus uses the title ‘Son of Man’ to describe himself, and this is a scriptural reference to the prophetic tradition rather than to a sense of divinity.
- The more famous Jesus becomes, the more mysterious he remains, and this becomes the basis for what we call the ‘messianic secret’ that is not revealed until after his death and resurrection.
- Even the resurrection is a secret, in fact. The original ending of this gospel has the women discovering the empty tomb and then being too afraid to say anything to anyone about it. Later editors couldn’t cope with that and added the bits about Peter going back to discover the truth. But, for some reason, Mark himself wanted to leave the mystery unsolved, the **secrecy** intact.

Surprise

- In almost every scene of Mark’s gospel—and every lectionary portion of it—there is something unexpected, something unusual, something unexplained. Like the role of the man with unclean spirit in today’s reading—we are left wondering why he knows what others do not and why Jesus heals him despite the threats. Not to mention the drama and intensity of his ‘loud voice.’ Now there’s an example of conservative translation, which is the case for most English translations available to us. I would have translated that as an ‘ear-piercing scream’. Fairly surprising in the context of a synagogue worship service.
- Throughout the gospel the story is similarly dramatic and unpredictable—and often without many details. There are loose ends, mysteries, questions left hanging. As you read, it’s interesting to ask: What if this was the only Gospel we had? Are its **surprises** frustrating or exciting?

Speed

- Everything in Mark’s gospel happens ‘on the run’ (or, more particularly in the terms of its literary reference, “on the Way”).

- Mark is grounded in the theology of ‘Journey.’ Everyone ‘walks the walk’ in this story—following Jesus to pain and glory—and quickly too.
- Mark repeatedly uses the Greek words *καὶ εὐτῆς*. It is translated into English in several ways (probably just to avoid the translators’ boredom)—as “just then, “immediately,” or “at once.” Today’s reading says that “*At once* his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.” *καὶ εὐτῆς* means “and immediately”—which Mark uses 29 times, literally making a lot of what grammar obsessive would call ‘run on sentences.’
- The sheer **speed** of this narrative is breath-taking, and leaves readers and hearers with a sense of intense urgency—probably just exactly what the author intended us to feel.

Make no mistake; this is a very carefully constructed work, even though it is written in a kind of basic style. Other writers may have ‘fleshed out’ the story but it is Mark who first thought that the story of Jesus should be written down, and it is Mark who points to the central concern for preserving and proclaiming this story—rather than focussing on exposition of theology or the political inner workings of the developing church, as other early writings like those of Paul do. It is Mark who makes a case, beginning right here in his first chapter, for seeing Jesus of Nazareth as the basis of all real authority—the ‘prophet like Moses’ [ref. Deut. 18], the ‘Son of Man’ like Ezekiel, the Messiah promised by Isaiah, the ‘Holy One of God’ as the spirit-troubled man proclaims [Mark 1.24]

Now...what are those key words for Mark’s gospel again? **Simplicity, secrecy, surprise and speed.** Remember and enjoy. Read, listen, study, pray, discuss this gospel.

We would all do well to realign our thinking this year to an ethos of simplicity, surprise, even a bit of secrecy, and certainly speed. In these we approach as close as we can to the actual lived experience of Jesus and the first disciples—for whom everything was in the present tense; for whom divine mystery was the secret of life; for whom surprise gave energy for their journey; and for whom following Jesus was an urgent matter of immediate importance.

The real authority of scripture is only found in the way it transforms ordinary human lives for the better, making us more committed, more loving and compassionate, oriented toward justice than we could ever otherwise be. The real authority of scripture is not in what is written or read or preached—but in what is lived. I have that on the best authority.