

Epiphany 4 – Wesley 9am & 10.30am – 1st February 2015

Theme: “The authority of Jesus’

Reading: Mark 1: 21-28

Text: “The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, What is this? A new teaching – and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.” Mark 1:27

Introduction

At the moment we have a sporting bonanza on our televisions with tennis, cricket and soccer all competing for our attention. I’m in seventh heaven but those who don’t love sport want other programs!

With each of these sports we have the panel of experts and commentators dissecting each match and giving us their viewpoints on what has happened. In fact we live in a time where we have all these authoritative people, in a host of areas, giving us their expert opinions on just about everything. We constantly see it on the media in the areas of:

- Health
- Wealth
- Medical
- Dietary
- Music buffs
- Gardening gurus
- Stock markets
- Psychologists
- Cooking
- Education
- Defence/war matters
- Politics
- Art
- Vets and pets
- Natural disasters
- Antiques
- Relationships
- Housing make-overs
- Environmental issues
- Literature
- Motoring
- Bringing up kids
- Aging
- And even preachers claiming the ‘only true gospel’ is their understanding and their way

No doubt you can add to this incomplete list – we have experts who are the authority in their area and they don’t mind sharing their information. These are the popular authorities and we are bombarded with their information, whether we want it or not. This is part of our media deluge that we are under today in this immediate, technological world we live in. I can go online right now and hear about the latest catastrophe, update the markets or hear what the weather forecast is for the next 7 or 40 days.

All this information can and does make us sceptical as well – not always trusting these ‘so called’ experts and their authority.

It is into this scenario that we have today’s reading from Mark’s Gospel and just maybe we also see why so many struggle with accepting the authority of Christ today, because of what they see happening, in the name of Christianity, and they say,

'If that is what Christianity is all about, I want nothing to do with it!'

I can't blame them at that point, but what we need to do is look afresh at the source and see the ministry of Jesus and interpret that for today. So let us take a few minutes to look at Mark 1: 21-28.

Mark 1: 21-28

William Placher in his book, 'Mark – Belief – A theological commentary on the Bible', writes about this passage saying:

"Jesus has proclaimed his central message and called his first disciples. Now he begins his ministry, and he begins it at the heart of his society: at the synagogue, and on the Sabbath. He teaches and cures – two of his ministry's central activities – and he does so in a way that reinforces what we learned in his call to the disciples. Twice, in a few verses, observers remark on his authority. 'Exousia' the Greek word for 'authority' was often applied to kings and especially with what God would have when his reign came." (page 37)

The issue I find fascinating is that the people were astonished two fold by his authority.

The first was his teaching authority.

We are not even told what his teaching was about. All we are told is:

"...he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law." Vs 22b

Obviously there was integrity with what he said and the way he lived his life that resonated with Jesus' hearers in a way that it didn't with 'the teachers of the law'. Part of the 'exousia', the authority that Jesus presented in his teaching also caused alarm and astonishment amongst the people and it is expressed clearly in this passage.

The second area was his healing authority.

Here is Jesus delivering his first sermon and suddenly he is interrupted by some-one with major mental health issues. In theory, this person shouldn't have been in the synagogue because they were sick. It was against Jewish law to be worshipping while sick. He wasn't meant to be there but he was and he recognised immediately who Jesus was. Here the person with multiple personalities cries out:

"What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?
I know who you are – the Holy One of God!" vs 24

Here we see the demonic force recognizing who Jesus is and by using his divine name trying to control Jesus. The power of the use of a name was common in Jesus' time because if you controlled the name they believed you also controlled the person. However Jesus recognizes this ploy and rebukes the unclean spirit with the words: "Be silenced/be quiet" and sternly commanded "Come out of him." Vs 25

This is the climax of the passage and builds on his already amazing teaching that is enhanced with the healing that follows.

Both areas of the ministry of Jesus illicit amazement from the people about the authority he has.

The disturbance of people by God through the ministry of Jesus had begun. This sets the scene for all of Mark's Gospel.

Not an easy passage for today's world!

What do we make of this passage?

Firstly, it is obvious that Jesus' genuine Godliness comes through to the people in his teaching. There was no saying one thing and doing another. This is important for us to listen to especially where there can be a discrepancy between belief and actions, words and deeds. This is not the way of Christ. Belief, words and actions all 'lined up together' and made for a genuineness not seen with 'the teachers of the law'. Here is a clue for making our faith genuine!

Secondly, there is an openness to all, not making the Law a burden but accepting all people. Jesus could have thrown out the 'man possessed with an evil spirit' from the synagogue, but he addressed him and healed him where he was. Certainly he was stern and direct with him as he casted out the 'evil spirit' but there was an amazing acceptance of him as well. Here we are taught as a community to surround with love, prayer and hope those with afflictions within our faith community seeking healing and wholeness for all. This is a reminder to us to care for those struggling around us and who may even be disruptive on occasions.

Thirdly, we are reminded to give thanks to God for healing and wholeness as we witness it within our faith community. Again, something that we are not always good at, but we are reminded afresh to do that today.

We live in a very different world to the one Jesus came into to minister to so long ago but teaching, healing and telling good news stories are very much part of our Christian faith and Christian communities today.

Let us pray

Come among us, Lord Jesus.

Deliver us from our modern day demons that still bind us.

Heal us of wounds we cannot heal by ourselves.

Touch our pain with your strong compassion that we may be made whole through your grace. Amen.