

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Authority

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Mark 1:16-28

Ephesians 4:11-16

Authority. Is that a good word or a bad one? Does it have positive or negative connotations for you? If you have been in the armed forces you might well hear it as a good thing, and think or say that a bit more authority would do certain people some good. But if you are told that the authorities are after you, you might feel a little less positive!

At the beginning of Mark's gospel, he wants to make it clear to us that Jesus had authority, and that this was noticed, when other things were not, and that this was literally remarkable. And so running through these first two stories Mark has to tell us, the first two glimpses he gives us of the kingdom of God in action, is the idea of Jesus' authority.

First of all we are taken to the shores of the Sea or lake of Galilee. A beautiful place, and we can imagine ourselves there on a warm morning, when the fishermen are mending their nets after the work of the previous night. Galilee has always been a rich source of fish for that area, and even in Jesus' day the fish were cured and sold to traders who took them far afield. The men who caught these fish were skilled labourers and made a decent living at their work. And along comes Jesus calling to the fishermen to follow him. We should note that he called them. It wasn't by accident that Jesus collected followers: it was deliberate. He wanted to challenge people to leave what they were doing and follow after him. The Greek uses that word "after", which is slightly awkward in English, making it clear that Jesus wasn't just looking for companions, friends to come with him. He was looking for disciples, people to learn from him, to be trained up in his wisdom and ways.

He called them and they came. They came right away: immediately, in Mark's favourite phrase. John's gospel may indicate that Peter and Andrew at least had met Jesus before, were even disciples of John the Baptist; Luke may indicate that they came with him after seeing him help them to a tremendous catch of fish. But Mark wants to make a point here, at the outset of Jesus' ministry, about his authority. And so he leaves us with the impression that Jesus had only to speak and these fishermen left everything, nets, way of life, families, including one probably puzzled and irate father - and followed him.

They followed him for a purpose. He told them what he was going to train them for: to be catchers of people. They were the first followers after Jesus, but there were to be others. Jesus already knew that his kingdom of God movement was to be self-propagating. He would call and train followers and in their turn they would call and train others. This is the pattern that the church has followed ever since.

Looking back on that sunlit lake shore, we might feel that we are a long way from there. Geographically, historically, yes we are. But the challenge comes to us to continue to be a link in that chain of discipleship. If we have been called and have responded, then it is not just to have Jesus as our companion: it is to be trained by him. We are called, even as the fishermen were called, to fish for people, to be "fishers of men" as the King James version puts it. If we allow the church to become an end in itself, and keeping those who are already called happy to be its first priority, if we don't make reaching out to others our first priority as disciples, if we don't do our

share of calling and training then we will be the weakest link, the place at where the chain might break.

The motif of authority is made very clear in the second part of the reading, when Jesus is in the synagogue. The pattern of local synagogue meetings was that of prayer and scripture, and then a man present would be asked to give a word. In many places there would be a small group of men who would be asked fairly frequently to speak, and often it would be a case of week by week hearing much the same thing. But when Jesus was asked to speak in the synagogue at Capernaum, it was like nothing they had heard before. What he said, presumably, was different, and how he said it - no humming and hawing and hedging his words. No quoting other authorities to give credence to his points. The people present recognised the timbre of authority. They were astounded, and this before he had healed the poor possessed man.

Which is what happened next. Possession was often used as an explanation for some forms of illness - but not all by any means. Jesus is confronted by this man shouting, asking what he has to do with "us". Us? Which us? The Jews? Surely not. It was obvious what Jesus had to do with the Jews: he was one of them. No, Mark is having the powers of evil speak through the man's voice. The powers of evil which knew that in the wilderness battle, Jesus had already overcome them; the powers of evil which knew that their day was done. And so they name Jesus "The Holy One of God."

This is an amazing thing to call him: the Holy One is an Old Testament title for God himself, not for the Messiah. The "Holy One of God" is another way of saying God's Son, when you think about it. Why did the people not hear and heed what was said? Why did Jesus tell the evil forces to be silent as well as to come out? In this gospel we are often going to see Jesus commanding silence and secrecy - and never getting it. In this case, I don't think that people would give any credence to what was said because of who was speaking. Mark makes sure that we know it is the evil forces speaking, not the man of his own knowledge. But the people who were accustomed to seeing and hearing this man would not necessarily make that distinction. They would know this man as a poor deluded creature. They would be used to his ravings and ramblings and they would have learned to pay him no attention. Maybe they thought him deranged but harmless - after all he does seem to have been allowed to be in synagogue with them, which a leper or someone considered dangerous to society would not have been. They hear him speak, but it's just old so-and-so, and who pays any attention to what he says?

But then the man is released from his bondage, his illness, his madness, and again the people are amazed at Jesus' authority. Mark has shown us his authority over people, who come when he calls; he authority in teaching and interpreting Scripture, which is different from the norm; and now we see his authority over evil. In Mark's account of the temptation in the wilderness, he hasn't said in so many words who won; but here it is made clear. Jesus is in charge. Jesus has conquered evil in himself and has God's authority to drive it out in others.

It is because of his authority that his fame begins to spread in Galilee.

In the Church in the West today we are rather afraid, even ashamed of authority. We have a past history of the church taking authority and power unto itself, and wielding it in decidedly unloving, even un-Christ-like ways. We have a present where certain people are made Pope or Bishop or moderator or minister and there is an expectation that the person will have an authority conferred by the rôle. But these rôles are entirely man-made, even if created in the service of God. And thinking people around us know that. And thinking people in the church often don't want to be associated with that sort of power (although there are others who long for the old days when the church could thunder and people trembled).

But Jesus' authority is not like that. Jesus' authority called people from one way of life to a better, fuller one. It released a man from bondage and gave him a full life, it enabled people to hear the truth about God to which they had become almost inured by repetitive and partial teaching. Jesus' authority was life-enhancing, attractive, worth talking about.

In the Church we may be afraid that claiming authority sits ill with the humility of disciples. Surely a humble person will not seek to have influence over others? True. But true humility does not think about itself at all. A humble disciple does not seek power, nor does he or she flee from influence when that is given. Jesus did not have authority because he went about shouting about it and drawing attention to it. He had authority because he followed God, he walked in the ways of God's kingdom, and so he was different, and it was noticed.

Maybe, almost certainly, the Church, even the Church of Scotland, has mistaken worldly power and influence for the authority of God's kingdom. Maybe, certainly, people see us now with a lot of baggage which we would rather not be carrying, but which has been handed down to us by previous generations of the church. Maybe our preference is to get on with being a Christian quietly, privately, avoiding any notice which might lead to our being misunderstood, or to questions and expectations which we could not answer or meet.

But we are called to be disciples. We are called to follow after Jesus, which means doing his things in his way. His things include calling others to come and follow also. You can't do that by keeping your faith isolated from the rest of your life. Jesus' things include giving clear teaching when it is called for: not ranting personal opinions, but faithfully opening up God's Word to show its application to the present day. (And to do that you have to be reading it for yourself.) Jesus' things include setting people free from the evil or the illness that binds them. And this can be done only by allowing God in Christ to help us overcome evil in ourselves, by the power of the cross, by the victory that Jesus himself won for us.

Jesus had authority because he had integrity. The whole of his life hung together and nothing was hidden away. Those who are his followers will also live with integrity so that those who want to can check and see that they are living in the way of Christ; such disciples often find that they have authority, although they do not seek it. In the end, true authority, that which is recognised and respected, is a gift from God. And God's gifts, are not to be despised and left unused, nor to be sought for personal glory, but used for the good of all.

Amen