



The Avenue Uniting Church

Sunday 28th January, 2024

"...with authority"

Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.

Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of GOD." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.



Contemporary Reading of Grace

(Gretta Vosper)

We are caught in the mystery of time.

At once both linear and cyclical,
we can neither turn it back
to re-do what we have lived before,
nor stop the seasons that we know
from ceaselessly ending,
beginning and ending again.

From this double perspective, we mark our work.

We find places where our journey
follows worn, smoothly familiar paths
and those where our course
has brought us new vistas to explore,
where our life together
forges new paths into unknown territory.
For all of this, we give thanks.

May we find in the unfolding of our days,
the rich depths of a familiar past,
the promise of a challenging and rewarding future,
and, in each and every day,
The fullest blessing we can know.



Witness to the Word

Mark's Gospel. The Gospel of "*and immediately*"! The gospel of getting somewhere in a hurry, of a man with a mission. The gospel we believe to be the first written, certainly the most urgent.

The gospel which gets right down to the big question in chapter 1: *Who was Jesus, and by what (or whose) authority did he do what he did?*

It's the question which underlies pretty much the whole of Mark's gospel. We see it in the affirmation by a centurion who attends Jesus' death "*Truly this man was GOD's son*", we see it in Jesus' discussions with his disciples, we see it in various places throughout Mark's story.

And because his is the “*and immediately*” gospel, we see it from the very start, as we saw a couple of weeks ago. By the time we come to the end of Mark chapter 1, Jesus has arrived from Nazareth, been baptised by John, spent time in the wilderness being tempted, gathered disciples, taught in a synagogue, healed Peter’s mother in law, healed the sick and performed exorcisms. (*And boy, was he tired!*)

This is a carefully crafted narrative, with no wasted stories or padding: everything is there for a reason. The question of Jesus’ authority is fundamental to Mark, as much in the story we read today as it is in the baptism and temptation stories.

- What does his authority look like?
- How does he choose to use it?
- Who recognises it?
- Who really recognises it?
- Who doesn’t get it?
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These are all elements of the way Mark’s story of Jesus will unfold. They shape how he chooses the stories that he does, out of all the many oral stories he could tell. They shape how he crafts his story, his “*good news*”.

These elements shape, for example, why Mark tells stories of Jesus teaching in the Capernaum synagogue and being seen as one who teaches with authority, alongside the stories of being given authority by people possessed with demons.

[It would be easy to get side-tracked here by questions about demons and spirits, by questions of how we should understand demons in our scientific age, and all of those questions. I respectfully suggest that that is a side track away from my key concern of today, so I don’t propose to say too much here. I’m well aware that we have ways to understand illness and demons in our day that are quite different from those of Jesus’ time, and don’t talk literally of “demons” as Mark does.

Having said that, I’m also very aware that I don’t know everything. There is much in the world that is beyond my ability to explain, define or understand. And I’m ok with that!]

But whether we talk about demons in supernatural terms, or whatever, is not all that relevant to a discussion of these verses in Mark’s gospel. His point, it seems to me, is that Jesus’ authority is affirmed: by those in the know, but by those beyond the boundaries too. It is an authority not imposed, but recognised, authority seen in what he says and in what he does.

Setting the scene this way, enables the writer to reveal Jesus’ priorities: to talk about how he uses his authority, on whose behalf, and for what purpose. And just in case we’re looking for clues on that, we see it given clear expression several times in Mark 1:

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of GOD has come near; repent, and believe in the good news”

“Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do”.

And the message? That “the kingdom”, *the way*, of GOD is about freedom from all that enslaves! Whether it be personal ‘demons’, or systems and powers and structures, or people using synagogues and churches to claim power over others, or... whatever.

“Good news”, for Jesus, is when people discover and live lives of freedom.

Anything that gets in the way of that is not of GOD – It's unholy!

There's a challenge for 21st western culture in that. We've moved towards a notion of freedom which simply means the absence of restraint; towards an understanding that *"I have the right to do what I want, when I want, and your responsibility is to let me do that"*.

Of course, this is not only nonsense but pretty much impossible. It's also the opposite of how Jesus understood freedom. Freedom cannot work as a system of competing rights, where my freedom comes at your expense, or vice versa. It can only work in community, where all have the freedom to be: to be, created in the image of GOD.

This was what Jesus was so driven about. In Mark's gospel - and in the others - we see his resolution, his determination, obsession even: not only to tell the good news, not only to show the good news, but to live the good news.

And the good news? That the way of GOD is freedom to live as if we are in the presence of sacredness each moment!

The good news? That even in the midst of situations and systems that enslave, even in the midst of personal 'demons' and behaviours which can hold us captive, there can be freedom!

And the good news? That not only are we free to see ourselves and others as loved, forgiven, and welcome in the presence of GOD's spirit, we're called to do so!

Our gospel, our 'big story', holds together death and resurrection life: beginnings, endings, and new beginnings. It lives with and honours the reality (necessity, even) of death, and death experiences. And it says that they are not the whole story. There is also life, life abundant.

Jesus was able to speak and act with authority about abundant life, because he lived it! Because people saw it in him. When he challenged the way things were, he also showed a different way. In the gospels we see what that cost him, and we shouldn't ignore the fact that abundant life may also be costly.

But the truth of 'resurrection' - however we understand what Jesus' resurrection looked like - is that abundant life can survive and grow, even when the odds against doing so are overwhelming. And Jesus' authority was in telling, showing, and living this truth, in the name of GOD!

We'll see that unfold once more as we read further in Mark's gospel. We'll spend time thinking about what that looks like, here in Blackburn, 2000+ years after Jesus, and hopefully be encouraged in following his way

That encouragement will be important, because in Mark's gospel, the *"and immediately"* gospel, the call is clear: *"Hang on, folks, this could be quite some ride!"* AMEN

Grow 4 your life!
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