

“Authority of Jesus”

In our scripture today from Mark 1:21-28, we continue to look at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. He had been empowered with his baptism. He established authority over Satan in the temptation story (vv.12-13). His disciples respond immediately to his word and follow him (vv. 16-20). In today’s passage, Jesus impresses the people by his teaching. Jesus calls attention not only to the content of his teaching but to himself and his identity. The crowds recognize that he teaches with authority, an authority the unclean spirits recognize is of the very Holy One of God.

What is so distinctive about Jesus’ teaching that not only humans but spirits respond with awe and amazement? What does it mean to teach with authority? And how do we, who live in a culture suspicious of authority and the church, teach in the way of Jesus?

We must look at the context of Jesus going to the synagogue to teach. What was the synagogue in Jesus’ day? The commentator William Barclay gives us a history. It was the place where the Jewish people gathered together in the community. The synagogue was primarily a teaching institution. A service consisted on three things. Prayer, the reading of God’s word, and the exposition of God’s word. There was no music, no singing and no sacrifice.

The synagogue did not have a permanent preacher or teacher. When the people met it was open to the Ruler of the Synagogue to call on any competent person to give the address and the exposition. This is how Jesus could come in and teach. He was already known to be a man with a message.

To Jews, the most sacred thing in the world was the Torah, the law, the first five books of the Old Testament. This law was considered divine. It had been given directly by God to Moses. It was considered necessary to guide and direct life. What was implicitly in the Torah needed to be brought out. To give study to the Torah and supply the implicit meaning of the Torah a class of scholars developed. These were the scribes, the experts of the law. The apostle Paul was a scribe. The title of the greatest of the scribes was Rabbi.

The scribes set out to extract rules and regulations for every possible situation in life. Their duty was to transmit and to teach the law and its developments. The deduced law and regulations were not written down; they were known as oral law. From generation to generation, scribes were taught and committed these laws to their memory. Scribes had the duty of giving judgment in individual cases, and practically every individual case must have produced a new law.

As Barclay points out, though, although the Jewish religion which began as a religion ended up as legalism. The scribes, for all their wisdom and learning, could only pass on what they had received and pass on what others received. There were times they really could not answer the people's questions.

When Jesus taught, though, the whole method and atmosphere of his teaching was like a new revolution. How did Jesus' authority differ from the teaching of the Scribes? He taught with personal authority. Whenever a scribe made a decision, it was not his own. He would say, "There is a teaching that...." and would then quote all his authorities. Scribes did not give independent judgment. When Jesus spoke, he spoke as if he needed no authority beyond himself. He cited no authorities. He spoke with the finality of the voice of God.

To the people it was like a breeze from heaven to hear someone speak like Jesus. The note of personal authority rang out. As observed by the Rev. Brian Maas, bishop of the Nebraska Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, who writes in this week's *Christian Century* magazine, "I envision a Jesus whose words carry the vitality and authenticity of direct connection to the source; one who doesn't just dispense content but tells the story he's lived." This is the lesson for us today. When we share the word of God with others, we need to

share it as we live it. We need to rely on the Holy Spirit within us to give us that personal touch.

Bishop Maas shares a story of his experience of taking a Bible course in college. This story reminds me of my experience when I went to seminary. Bishop Maas' professor was the rector of a small Episcopal parish who had a PhD and a passion for teaching. It was not the textbook which really taught the Bishop. It was not the Sunday School and worship growing up that really taught the Bishop. It was during the course with the rector that he encountered tales that had been overlooked by the lectionary and the Sunday school curriculum. Through the tales of the rector, the Bishop met a lot of characters he had not previously known. He was reintroduced to flesh-and-blood people, warts and all. This was a new teaching and with authority. As Bishop Maas points out, the teaching came not through the authority of a PhD but from one who truly knew the Bible as the living word of God through life experience. This professor made the scripture alive to him.

The lesson we take from this is to ask the following questions. Are Jesus' words about God so active, so compelling that they capture the attention and the imagination of all who hear? Do they hear the same old thing in a new and vibrant voice? Is there an element of the first person in Jesus' teaching that distinguishes it

from the third person of the scribes? Is that what gets the attention of the unclean spirits?

This may be too many questions. But my experience of scripture is that it skews toward the lively when approached with curiosity and veers towards deadness when approached with certainty. We are going to be asked those questions like why do bad things happen to good people? Why does one child in a family turn out so well and another child from the same family have so many problems? Why am I hurting so badly?

Yet, in preaching and teaching, in encountering people who've heard it all before, it's my hope that sharing a living word, engaging it (and them) with curiosity, may help people to experience the word's vitality themselves, to catch a bit of the spirit that would have them not marveling at the teaching but rather asking, with the good folks of Capernaum, "What is this?"—and having their questions carry them into the week that follows. Is this your mission as you take the good news of Jesus Christ into the world?