

Sermon for Epiphany 4 2021

22 "They were astounded at Jesus' teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." Mark 1.22

Authority is an interesting word. It can mean all sorts of things to all sorts of people. The dictionary meaning is interesting in how it defines authority: *The power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience. "He had absolute **authority over his subordinates**".* In this very correct meaning authority is total and complete control of another, or others. The teaching that the wife is under the authority of the husband would be interpreted in this manner. In this teaching the wife is not the partner of the man, but rather she is the servant.

In the Pentecostal church a person is not permitted to publicly exercise their spiritual gift unless they are under the authority of the Pastor. The Pastor does not dictate how the gift will be used, but permission is given to exercise that gift. This means that when someone comes forward and says that they have the gift of prophecy and that they have a message for us, the first question must be, "Under what authority do you exercise this gift?" If there is no authority the message is considered invalid.

In the gospel reading today Jesus is recognised as teaching with authority. He does not teach as the scribes teach, but rather he teaches with authority. Jesus does not use this authority to ensure that people are subservient to him. He does not treat us as his personal slaves. He teaches with the authority of the Father and we are permitted to make the decision regarding our future behaviour. Will we be guided by Jesus' Teaching, or will we reject it? Jesus' teaching leaves us with the personal authority to accept or reject all that he places before us.

Jesus' authority is firmly connected to his charge from his Father. His Authority is an exposition of Jesus' knowledge and understanding of God the Father. Jesus' authority is very evident when he delegates the role of Church, and messengers of the good news of the gospel, to us. Unlike the dictator who has total self-serving power, He does not order us to do anything apart from the charge to love one another and to love God. Much of his active teaching is an exercise in example. Jesus shows us stuff.

Today Jesus shows us his power over the spiritual world. Today he is recognised by a demon and he orders that demon to depart from the human it apparently inhabited. His scriptural teaching appears to be more than repeating the phrases of the law as the Scribes and Pharisees seem to do. The reason his teaching is identified as different is because he interprets scripture: He interprets the phrases of the Law. This is what it means as opposed to this is what it says.

In the Old Testament account of the Law there is a mountain of "Thou Shalt not" phrases. In fact, we could be forgiven for assuming that the entire Law of the Old Testament consisted of sentences beginning with, "Thou Shalt not."

Jesus, in the New Testament spends much more time telling us to do things. “Love your enemy”, “Turn the other cheek”, “Love your neighbour”, “do this in remembrance of me”, “Pray then in this way, our Father in heaven”, “When you pray go into your room and shut the door”, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you”. I am sure that you get the idea. Jesus’ use of authority in our lives is an encouragement to live in imitation of him. To use my favourite phrase, we are to be as Christ to all people.

The question we are compelled to ask ourselves is this: “How do we exercise the authority that we have”. We do have a significant choice in this. We can brandish our authority like the self-serving dictator demanding that everyone obey us. We can throw out orders with gay abandon and be crusty and cross if they are not followed to the letter. We can dream up terrible forms of punishment for the disobedient or for those who dare question. We can even declare that we have power and authority that is not ours to use.

A classic example of this is the minister who declared that he had been appointed by God and therefore anyone who disagreed with him was disobeying God. It is a hard argument to refute. How do you argue with God? This is not his authority to use.

On the other hand, we can exercise our authority by following the example of our Lord. We can reach out with love; we can encourage others to explore and to think; we can be people who encourage and guide; we can be positive examples to those who look to us for leadership; we can avoid the temptation to condemn and criticise, and we can seek only to search out the good; we can gently correct the misguided without condemning them to hell.

When Jesus taught with authority, he gave us a wonderful example for life. Yes, he got cross from time to time. Yes, he challenged the Scribes and the Pharisees. He even despaired over the ignorance of the disciples. Even in these situations Jesus was teaching that there was a better way, a new teaching: that there was a positive way to lead the people of God.

In our colloquial language we might say this. “Put down the stick of punishment, and reach out in love and compassion.” This is what our Lord does for us, over and over again.