Jesus: Authority over word and world – Mark 1:21-28 and Ps 111

We are following the lectionary and this season in the church calendar is known as ‘epiphany’, which literally means ‘manifestation’ or ‘appearance’. It begins with Jesus’ appearance to the magi, the wise men from the East. In the western church, the main focus of epiphany is that single encounter, but some churches in the East think of the season more broadly, including Jesus’ baptism and his miracle at Cana as well.

I think of this whole season as introducing the incarnate Son of God to the world, in various ways. Today's gospel reading, for the fourth Sunday of epiphany, is from Mark chapter 1, specifically vv.21-28. For me, this episode is a further manifestation of Jesus, and specifically reveals more about his authority.

Let’s get a little bit of context. The section immediately preceding today’s passage depicts Jesus’ calling of his first disciples. In that part of chapter 1, which ends at v.20, the first disciples simply put down their nets and follow him when he calls them. Such is Christ’s authority among people, especially those who sought to serve God. Then, the part of scripture immediately following today’s reading, beginning at v.29, reveals Jesus’ power and authority over illness. Reading between the lines, there is even the suggestion that he exercises authority over   Simon-Peter’s mother-in-law, which is no small feat for any man.

In a way, this whole epiphany tranche of scripture actually relates to authority, albeit in different forms, and in our verses today, 21-28, the word ‘authority’ appears twice in eight short verses.

Now to our text.

*21They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach.*

v.21. Jesus is in Capernaum and already about his father's business. There would have been small synagogues dotted over this area, and having entered this particular one, Jesus begins to teach.

We know that various people, particularly those in the religious and political establishment, criticised Jesus as an untrained and unaccredited rabbi. He has not been to seminary and he certainly does not behave in the way that many people thought a rabbi should. At some point during the worship service, Jesus goes to the front and begins to teach. From Mark’s account, we cannot be sure about the content of his teaching, but really it can only be something based on and expanding the Old Testament scriptures. What I like here is that he is *teaching*. This is a broad term and we cannot read too much into it, but in an age where we come across all kinds of ‘me-centred’ sharings and rather thin testimonies, the word ‘teach’ warms my heart. I am not against honest sharing and encouraging testimonies, but the pressing need in today’s church is teaching which shapes people and helps them move forward as disciples by giving them the whole picture of God’s redemptive plan.

*22The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.*

v.22. I love verse 22. The people are amazed at his teaching, and although I'm sure that what Jesus says is great and inspiring, and exegetically fool proof, what really strikes people in the synagogue that day is the sense of authority.

The contrast that Mark sets up with the teachers of the law is important. In some parts of the church it is common to think of these teachers as charlatans or people who are play acting or insincere. Personally, having done a bit of reading on this, I think that's a little unfair. The teachers of the law were being faithful to the religious and theological tradition as they saw it, although there probably *was* an unhealthy legalistic emphasis on following and living out some of the details of the Old Testament law. In the OT we read about Israel’s repeated failures and betrayal of God and his commission to them. As a result, the nation had been exiled for not being faithful to what God had told them in the Old Testament and further chastened by not hearing from God for 400 years in the inter-testamental period between the end of Malachi and the coming of Christ. Because of Israel’s disobedience and the sanction that this brought, the teachers of the law were zealous about commending the law as they understood it and trying to make the Old Testament and its message known to as wide a section of the Jewish people as possible, for their own good. After temple worship became impossible during the exile, this group of people emphasised devotion to the scriptures in ways which actually led indirectly to our modern church worship practices.

It is possible that these teachers of the law focused so much on the *letter* of the law that they neglected the *spirit* of the law and their connection to the God represented by that law. And don’t we see the same challenge in some churches today? There are people who emphasise certain kinds of outward conformities or adhere to certain practices or who want to batten down the hatches and shut out the world, for good reasons. But there are warnings about such attitudes right through the gospels! I came across the phrase ‘generous orthodoxy’ some time ago and I really like it. It reminds me to connect the meaning of my faith on paper with the effect of my faith in real life in a way which is welcoming and nurturing to others.

Back to Jesus. He has authority in a way that the teachers of the law apparently do not. His authority is deep, subtle, and awe inspiring. That’s why, for me, this event is also an epiphany. Jesus’ teaching carries such authority because he is the central theme of the scripture. He doesn’t just understand it really well or model it in a faithful way. He *is* the teaching. You remember a little later, that Jesus pointedly challenges some of the Jews by saying to them: “*You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify* **about me***, yet you refuse to come to me to have life*”. That’s John 5:39-40. In fact, this central role for Jesus in the Bible is described theologically and beautifully by John in the opening verses of his gospel when he refers to Jesus as ‘the Word’. The word became flesh. How could Jesus the *incarnate* word fail to have authority as he taught the *written* word?

It is also significant that Mark tells us that the *people* are amazed. Somehow, in what he is saying and how he is saying it, Jesus is able to cut through misunderstanding, negative experiences, prejudice, and just plain rebellion. While the teachers of the law set out to democratise the Jewish faith and bring it to the ordinary people, with what seem to have been rather mixed results, Jesus balances God’s mercy and holiness in a liberating and demanding way. He gets it right.

In Protestant, evangelical circles we are very keen that people should have their doctrine right and behave in a way consistent with our confession. All well and good. But we also suffer from our blind spots, don't we, and we can get hung up on this or that issue, and it is not unknown for us to forget that this faith of ours is fundamentally a relationship with God rather than an outward religious performance or acceptance of certain abstract principles. And we all have our own little horror stories about this sort of thing. This is why it is so striking that the Word of God becomes flesh and shows what a life fully in tune with God looks like. Not all of us teach in a formal sense, but we all can communicate about our faith and our God. May we always remember that conversations, words on paper, tracts, websites, theological books, whatever, are meaningless unless they point people to God himself.

Jesus’ authority is unique in that he is the second person of the Trinity, but on that day in the synagogue those who see him and hear him have no idea that he is fully God *and* fully man. They just see someone who seems to understand the Bible deeply and tries hard to live it out. Even at this early stage in his ministry, there is something unusual and deeply authentic about Jesus. There is a kind of aura about him, a mixture of spiritual authenticity, emotional robustness, and identification with ordinary people, which draws them to him. In my own Christian life, I have met so-called ordinary men and women of God, who although they cannot compare with Jesus, nonetheless have that ‘holy something’, and an authority based on years following their Lord, which commends them to us and attracts us to them. They are our example, in themselves and because they point us to the Author and Perfecter of our faith.

Psalm 111 is in the lectionary as a companion passage to our section of Mark 1 and I want to fold it into our thinking at this point. It is an example of God’s compassionate authority and points forward to the person and work of Christ. Perhaps this is the kind of passage that Jesus is teaching on in the synagogue. For reasons of time, I will mention a few points rather than go through it in detail.

In formal and informal settings, the psalmist praises God with his whole heart. He praises him for his righteousness, grace, and compassion in vv.3-4. God has shown his people how to live in v.7 and he is the originator of a covenant of grace with his people, which lasts for ever. In addition, God has provided redemption, as v.9 tells us. And finally, respect and awe of the Lord bring wisdom for everyday life in v.10. There is something else for the teachers of the law and others present in the synagogue that day. Wisdom and knowledge are not the same thing. Wisdom is an orientation, an attitude to life based on human experience of God infused with his presence by the Spirit. It is about values which orient the person to follow and imitate God, primarily as revealed in his son. The psalmist reminds us in v.10 that *all who follow his precepts have good understanding*. And all of this is packed into less than a dozen verses! Perhaps this is what Jesus is talking about, which gives his teaching such a powerful sense of authority and conviction.

That Saturday, something unusual is happening in the synagogue as an apparently ordinary human being teaches from an Old Testament scroll in a way which inspires and challenges and hints at divine authority. And you can imagine all of this swirling around in the minds of those present.

*Who is this person, this apparently unschooled, slightly pretentious wannabe rabbi? Who are these people who came with him? How come he has this odd perspective on the scriptures which fits in with where the basic message is going yet also seems to challenge what we have learnt in the past? He's not undoing what we know about our Hebrew scriptures. He's not telling us that everything we've heard in the past is wrong, but is somehow affirming it and then bringing it to life, and pointing it further and making it more positive than we have ever heard before.*

It's sort of disturbing and reassuring at the same time. Perhaps the group is conflicted, wanting to hear more while also wanting him to sit down. What's going on here? And right in the middle of this question of authority and the related comparison between this country rabbi and the teachers of the law, an existential hand grenade is lobbed into the proceedings in v.23.

*23Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, 24“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!”*

vv.23-24. An evil spirit, or rather several evil spirits, cry out, *‘What you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?’* While the question of authority in the area of teaching and over the scripture is central in the minds of those listening to Jesus in the synagogue, a similar question about authority explodes about the created order. The impure spirit raises the issue of Jesus's authority over creation. *What do you want with us? Have you come to destroy us?* The human listeners may be amazed at Jesus’ unexpected authority, but the forces of evil are not. They know who he is. The incarnate *word* has power and authority not only over the written *word*, but also over the created *world*.

The timing here is exquisite, isn't it? Jesus’ teaching has begun to make the teachers of the law look rather inadequate and now comes a confession by superhuman entities or forces which reveals Jesus's authority as belonging to a much higher level. *I know who you are -- the holy one of God.* Holy smoke! This is authority with a capital A. Theologians, preachers, and teachers of the law can argue about teaching and dispute about how we deal with the scriptures and the question of authority, but when people come up against evil spirits, there is nothing to be said. Whatever the reaction of fearful humanity, created forces of evil recognise the full authority of the holy one of God.

*25“Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” 26The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.*

vv.25-26. It's a bit of a High Noon moment, isn't it, as the one who so deftly taught the scriptures now comes up against spiritual forces of evil. Jesus’ words in v.25 are full of authority, again unlike the teachers of the law: *Be quiet! Come out of him!* No invitation, negotiation, or exhortation. Just a simple command. And in v.26 the impure spirit leaves, confirming Jesus’ authority over this aspect of the created order.

*27The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.” 28News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.*

vv.27-28. In v.22 those in the synagogue are amazed at Jesus’ teaching. And in this verse they are amazed again, this time at his actions as well. Jesus’ authority as religious speaker and spiritual deliverer complement and validate each other. And in these last verses we pick up some of the themes found in Psalm 111. In Mark 1 we learn a lot about Jesus’ authority in his repeated epiphanies at the start of his public ministry. But we also see the other side of his authority in how he interacts with people. In teaching a new and liberating extension of the OT and in delivering an oppressed man, Jesus shows that his authority comes with the aim of helping people, individuals and communities. Words in Ps 111 such as *gracious, compassionate, covenant, faithfulness*, and *uprightness* show us that this is authority fundamentally directed at helping others. It is authority which assists, liberates, affirms, and protects. We live in an age of political strongmen and strongwomen, who have and exercise authority for themselves and their tribes. Yet, true greatness recognises its own authority but uses it for others, for the weak, disadvantaged, vulnerable or oppressed.

Present at Capernaum that day are people who want and need more from their religion than lifeless orthodoxy and constraining conformity. Others see and feel the suffering of those oppressed by evil spirits. Jesus’ exercise of authority results in a new sense of wholeness and peace, biblical shalom. He is dealing with people’s issues in the here and now, but this epiphany season also inaugurates a new era of God's intervention in human affairs which will continue into the fully consummated kingdom of God after the Risen Christ returns for ever. You can imagine the crackle of spiritual and emotional excitement in the air as those present begin to digest what they have seen and understand how it fits into God’s redemptive plan. It is no surprise then that news of him spreads quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

At what is still just about the beginning of a new year, let us acknowledge and accept the authority of Christ, as supreme teacher, healer, and deliverer. Let us be amazed and marvel as his power and authority, manifest as compassion and mercy to his wayward people. And as we are changed by his righteousness and generous orthodoxy, may news of him spread all over the regions that we inhabit and influence. Amen!