

## Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B)

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalm 94

1 Corinthians 7:32-35

Mark 1:21-28

Any of you who have ever studied or taught at university would know that many undergraduate essays are little more than a patchwork of quotations surrounded by adjoining filler. And, to be honest, a lot of the time this is appropriate. In some cases the motivation might be laziness, but I suspect that for many students there's simply an implicit acknowledgement of the reality of their situation. That is to say, most beginner students are astute enough—and humble enough—to realise that they can't really say much on their own authority – and so to make their case, they have to lean on the authority of others more learned than themselves.

And this is precisely how the scribes and Pharisees taught in Jesus' day. "Rabbi Abraham says this... Rabbi Gamaliel says that..." To be a teacher was simply to know the appropriate authorities well, and to know how to apply their teaching to a given situation.

So, when a new young rabbi appears on the scene in Capernaum, his audience is understandably expecting more of the same. Only this time, they are in for a surprise – Jesus does not quote those who went before him, but instead directly speaks the Word of God. He has no need to cite learned authorities, because no-one is more learned about the Word of God than he. In fact—as would be revealed in due time—he happens to *be* God's Word made flesh. He does not rely on the authority of Moses and his spiritual descendants – he speaks from his own authority.

As a result, when Jesus speaks, the people are *struck* by the authority of his teaching. Some translations say that the people were *spellbound* by him.

The word for authority in Greek that is used here is "exousia" – it's a very telling word, it means "from the being of." Jesus speaks out of his own being, and this takes their breath away. We see an example of Jesus' authoritative approach in the Sermon on the Mount, where he frames each point by saying, "You have heard it said... but *I say...*" "You have heard it said in the Torah"—which just happened to be the most authoritative expression of the mind of God that the Jews had—"but *I say...*" In other words, Jesus is claiming to be more authoritative than even the Torah, a point which was not lost on his gobsmacked audience.

Now in our Gospel passage today, St Mark doesn't actually say what Jesus was teaching. At this stage, he's not so much interested in the specifics of Jesus' teaching as he is in underlying the uniqueness of who this figure must be, to claim this kind of authority.

The prologue to St John's Gospel says it explicitly: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word *was* God. And this Word became flesh in Jesus Christ." In a slightly more subtle way, this is the very point that St Mark is making by highlighting Jesus' unique authority in today's Gospel. Jesus is not simply "the friend of God", as Moses was spoken of – he *is* God, the Word made flesh.

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Now, for us post-moderns, "authority" has become something of a dirty word. We've seen authority misused and abused throughout much of human history, and we've developed an inherent mistrust of it. All too often, we've seen humans using the authority they've been given to pursue power and dominion, to seek to possess and to dominate. And this theme has been repeated so often in our culture—including, at times, within the Church—that our instinctive response to a claim of authority is often to *rebel* against it. For instance, almost every time an authority figure is represented in a movie or TV show, they're shown as someone who needs to be resisted, and the heroes are presented as those who rebel against them.

So in the light of this cultural chorus which essentially says that all authority is bad and untrustworthy—and which we've all absorbed at least to some degree—as disciples of Jesus it's very important for us to clarify something – namely, that *authority can be good*. Authority can be good, *if...* it's truly of God. If it's truly of God.

The root of the English word *authority* is "of the author, the originator, the creator." One who creates something has authority over it (as we said in the Greek) of his very *being*. And it's important to recognise that God created the universe, not out of a lust for power, but out of love.

God is indeed all-powerful, but his authority is not merely an expression of might making right. God's authority over us is more akin to the fact that he knows us better than we know ourselves. And crucially, that he *loves us* more than we love ourselves.

Don't forget, Jesus—whom we hold as the definitive revelation of the face of God—freely let go of his divine power, to assume—as Saint Paul puts it—the condition of a slave. Not only did he humble himself by taking on human flesh and becoming like us in all things but sin, but once he was among us he took on the role of a servant, humbly washing his disciples' feet, before even more humbly giving his life on the cross for our salvation.

The all-knowing and all-powerful God has shown us in Jesus Christ that he is also all-loving. In other words, God has shown us that his authority *can be trusted*.

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So let's return to the text. We've seen that the authority of Jesus' teaching left a deep impression on his audience. But as we see in the following verses, Jesus' authority also explains his *power*.

We're told that in the synagogue there was a man possessed by an unclean spirit, which began yelling at Jesus. But when faced with the kind of phenomenon that strikes fear into the hearts of men, Jesus is unruffled. He does not beg or bargain with the evil spirit. Indeed, rather than Jesus being afraid of *them*, the demons are afraid of *him*. They shriek for fear in his presence, and he calmly commands them to be quiet and to get out. A moment later, all is still. And a former victim is now a free man, as the bystanders marvel.

Now note the question that was asked by the demon: "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" This fear expressed by the unclean spirit regarding the threat that Jesus posed was not entirely misplaced. Not only could this demon see his power, it could also see—probably better than us—the *implications* of Christ's mission, and the fact that nothing would be the same again.

Jesus' life and death would indeed have the effect of turning the world upside-down. And the fear expressed by this unclean spirit can also be shared by the powers and principalities of this world, once it is realised how earth-shaking Christianity really is for conventional culture and "the way we do things".

After all, ours is a Saviour who had an annoying habit of saying things like, "The first will be last and the last will be first." Ours is a Saviour who constantly turned conventional wisdom on its head – who chose to be born, not in a royal palace, but in a lowly manger; and who grew up, not in a city at the heart of the empire, but in a small out-of-the-way town; and who chose to endure human violence on the cross rather than inflict it.

And so, as Christ's followers, and in a society that seems to be slowly distancing itself further from its Christian heritage, we should know that many of *us* may eventually been seen as the kind of threat that the unclean spirit saw in Jesus. But we should also be aware that these unclean spirits were ultimately powerless before the Lord.

In the Easter miracle, Christ showed his power and authority even over death – that most unconquerable of foes. And so it is no coincidence that the most common one-liner in the Bible is, "Do not be afraid." In the light of Christ, Saint Paul can exclaim, "Death, where is your sting?" In the light of Christ, we see that God's authority can indeed be trusted. Indeed, when we see it for what it really is, and give ourselves over to it, God's authority is actually the most consoling thing in the world.

Christ's victory is already won, and we have the privilege of being on the winning side, even if the final expression of that victory will not take place until the end of time. But we can take comfort in knowing that our Lord has gone before us to make the path safe, and that the Holy Spirit has been given to us to guide us. So let us place

our lives once more in the arms of the Lord, trusting in his authority and his sure protection.