**28th January 2024
Deuteronomy 18.15-19
Mark 1.21-28

 Words of Authority Actions of Love**

Introduction to the Theme: *To the synagogue with Jesus.*

I once heard a teacher give advice to a new member of staff; it went like this: *Don’t smile at ‘em until half term!* Something about putting down your authority on day one in front of the class!

Well, for most of this year our gospel readings in church will come from the earliest and shortest gospel written by Mark. And today’s reading chronicles an opening scenes. It’s one of the first things Jesus says and does, so it sets the tone for the next 16 fast moving chapters.

Jesus has now called his disciples together and he’s off – the first place he visits is a familiar one, a synagogue. And this was at Capernaum, a place name that literally meant the village of Nahum, a community of around 1,500 located on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee and thought to be the so called ‘HQ’ of Jesus throughout his time there before travelling south to Jerusalem closer to the days of his crucifixion.

Jesus seems very much at home within his Jewish roots and naturally, perhaps we might say *comfortably,* finds himself at Synagogue on the Sabbath.

In today’s narrative he takes on the role of preacher and eventually healer.

Mark, the scholars tell us, often arranges his episodes in sandwich pieces – so perhaps our Bite Sized services at LunchBreak are quite appropriate. And here, in today’s episode the filling of the sandwich is the exorcism of the man with unclean spirits, and the bread either side is Mark making the point that Jesus preached as one with authority.

So, in our sermon this morning we’ll go to synagogue with Jesus, and we’ll join the crowd as they both listened to his words and then witnessed his actions. And perhaps the question we all need to ask as we look on, is: what would I have made of Jesus, the preacher and Jesus, the healer?

**Sermon: Words of Authority, Actions of Love.**Words can be powerful – hence that well known, but not entirely true saying that the pen is mightier than the sword.

Words, speeches, maybe even sermons can lift the spirit and bring about a deep sense of identity and purpose.

And it seems that Jesus was a great preacher using his gift of oratory in keeping over 5000 spellbound and forgetting to eat lunch on a hillside, to upsetting the home crowd in another visit to a synagogue, that time in Nazareth.

From the Jewish scriptures this morning we read a passage from Deuteronomy that talks about God raising up a preacher prophet in the style of Moses. In Acts 3 Peter quotes the passage relating that promise to the ministry of Jesus, as does John in his gospel. It's the idea and longing for a servant of God to speak words of hope and liberation from God.

So, in this passage there is the idea that Jesus was a good speaker, worth listening to because he seemed to speak with authority, and, of course, teachers were, and are, extremely important in Jewish culture. We are even told in verse 22: *The people were amazed at his teaching, for unlike the scribes, he taught with a note of authority.*Now that’s intriguing and begs the question what does it mean to speak in such a way?

Was it his style? Was it somehow *original?* Maybe it was his passion so that integrity and sincerity combined to shine through? Or perhaps it wasn’t so much the presentation but the substance?

It seems significant that Mark, maybe a little ungenerously, makes a comparison between Jesus and the Scribes.

Their teaching was famous for being somewhat oppressive with rules upon rules to follow. It was all very technical and always a call to do more and more.

Jesus, on the other hand, basically had one theme in his sermons and that was *The Kingdom of God,* and the message within the theme was essentially about *liberation.* God’s love sets us free.

Jesus’ style appears to be somewhat folksier than the scribes. He taught using images from ordinary, everyday life – of course, that’s the genius of his parables. However, and there always seems to be an *however,* both the style and substance of Jesus’ preaching didn’t please everyone.

Many years ago I was invited by the Chaplain of Magdelene College in Cambridge, who I knew, to preach in the college chapel at Evensong one Sunday and then dine afterwards in hall.

My instructions from the chaplain were quite clear. He told me he wanted the students that term to hear from ordinary preachers. I took the fact that he viewed me as *ordinary* as a compliment! His idea was that in chapel it would be good for the students not only to hear from world class theologians, but also from local church, grass roots ministers like me.

Well I took him at his word and preached a so called *ordinary* and down to earth sermon; in fact it was a version of the one I’d already delivered earlier in the day from the pulpit of my own church.

I can only tell you that I had a rather full-on conversation with the Master of Magdelene College over dinner afterwards! He challenged me on almost every point I’d made, and I don’t think he really approved of my folksy style. On the way back to the car the Chaplain apologised to me that the Master had eaten *Roast Preacher* for his supper that evening! I’ve never been invited back!

Well, Mark is making a statement about Jesus’ preaching in his opening chapters and what he’s really saying to us is that this Jesus was, by and large, a controversial preacher.

And it was a controversy that divided people. Some heard his words and rejoiced at the liberation they proclaimed, and these were often the so-called ordinary people often struggling with life. Whilst others, often the so-called religious professionals like the Scribes, felt threatened and undermined by what he said. And, eventually, it was this group who devised a plan to silence him.

We may wonder why they felt so threatened? But isn’t it always the case that what is said isn’t always what is heard – and most preachers only have to preach a couple of sermons before they realise that!

So, here at Capernaum, even though nearly everyone gave him more than a seven out of ten for that sermon, the morning is dominated by the reaction not of the many but of one man – a man who interrupts because he is unwell.

If the first part of today’s narrative is about Words of Authority, the second is about an Action of Compassion.

In those far off days people like Mark, writing this gospel, thought of such a man as having within him an unclean spirit. So, the first miracle in Mark’s gospel is, we would say, an exorcism – the casting out of a demon.

Verse 26 describes the scene: *The unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions and with a loud cry it left him.*Mark, as we’ll see in upcoming weeks, presents the ministry of Jesus in apocalyptic, end times terms; of two worlds, as it were, clashing. As such it is, of course, a piece of writing very much of its time and it certainly presents Jesus as the one who could drive out the demons.

So in the story even as that buzz of appreciation goes around the worshippers one man, deranged and seemingly at odds with himself, shouts out *‘What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us’?*
Mark, I suspect more poetically than scientifically, is describing to us a collision between two forces in the synagogue – the forces of goodness and evil. They collide and do battle that Saturday morning. They make this comfortable place for Jesus into an uncomfortable arena. It’s as if the demon in this man knows he’s been rumbled by the morning preacher, knows it has much to lose, knows its cruel hold on this individual is being threatened by the love and goodness at the centre of Jesus.

It’s surely significant that the demon calls out: *I know who you are – the Holy One of God.*
But that’s never really enough is it? Head knowledge isn’t the same as faith.

Being a pilgrim on a journey isn’t the same as being a student just wanting to pass an exam.

One demands knowledge – the other is all about putting those truths into practice, living out the knowledge and letting it mould you as it seeps into your heart and brings about transformation.

In today’s passage the demon may ‘know’ Jesus is the Holy One of God, but that demon won’t kneel and worship God as a result, won’t change his mind or let that truth melt his heart.

So, Jesus casts out the demon and, Mark says, with a loud cry it left the man and his life was restored.

This, it’s sometimes said, is the Cosmic Christ doing battle with evil forces.

It's certainly the Compassionate Christ bringing healing and wholeness as his very first act in this mission which is God’s.

Today, by and large, we might want to say that probably many of the accounts of demon possession written down in the gospels would be described by us differently. Today we are grateful for the wonderful advancements that have been made in the world of science that help us both understand and care for the body and the mind.

What we all know is that vulnerability is part of our humanity and nothing to be ashamed of.

In today’s passage Jesus’ first act is to bring healing and wholeness to a person whose mind had been deeply troubled. He gave this man a new beginning. He comes alongside him. He doesn’t ignore him, but enters into his pain and does all he can to bring him back to completeness.

And these will be the themes that the define the mission of God, as exemplified by Jesus in the next sixteen chapters of Mark.

Words of authority, actions of love – both found in one synagogue service on day one of Jesus’ mission.

May we continue that mission in our words and actions this week, remembering the one who, in this ongoing season of Epiphany, is revealed to us as the Jesus who spoke with authority and acted with love. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 24th January 2024*