

AUTHORITY, POWER, AND COMPASSION

Psalm 111; Mark 1:21-28

In Mark's gospel events in Jesus' life seem to progress in quick succession. Within just the first part of the first chapter, we find he has been baptized by the Spirit and tempted in the wilderness. Then he is proclaiming the reign of God, and has gathered together at least 4 followers. And now Jesus' *public* ministry begins to gain momentum.

Jesus travels to Capernaum and on the sabbath he enters the synagogue—a setting of prayer, teaching, worship, and community gathering—and he teaches the people assembled there. The fact that Jesus is teaching isn't so remarkable, it's his manner of teaching and the reaction of the people that really stands out; for, as we heard in today's scripture, he “taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Mark 1:22). So, what is it about Jesus' way of teaching that differs so greatly from the other religious leaders? What is it that makes the people comment to one another about Jesus' ability to speak with such authority?

The religious leaders of the day certainly knew how to speak and teach, but their method of teaching had been handed down to them for generations; they taught by quoting the scriptures and the words of rabbis who had come before them. They spoke with the authority of a tradition that had been presented in the same sort of way for many years—generations, even. So when Jesus comes on the scene and interprets the law and speaks on behalf of God without engaging in much dialogue about traditions (as the scribes would have done), when he uses his own voice and not the voices of others to tell of God's reign, God's kingdom come... well, the people gathered in the synagogue weren't accustomed to hearing a religious leader speak in such a way, and it was powerful.

And as we read on, we see that this authority with which Jesus speaks becomes more powerful. Because as they are all there in the synagogue, a man with an unclean spirit enters and cries out. It is likely an alarming display: a man possessed by a demon, shouting at Jesus. And it is alarming for more reasons than you might suspect.

Note that this man has been labelled as “unclean.” This was a society that believed that if you were sick, if you had leprosy, if you were blind, if you were paralyzed, if you were possessed by an unclean spirit, then you must not have lived right by God in some way, and you were being punished by God; you were no longer seen as worthy or pure. Wealth could be an indication of God’s blessings; poverty could be an indication of God’s punishment. And if you were impure or unclean, you were viewed as unholy, and you certainly could not enter God’s holy place of worship.

The religious leaders at this point in time not only preached a tradition that had been passed along for years, but they also practiced and participated in a system of purity. Purity systems are social systems that contrast pure and impure things, places, and people along a spectrum. And this system absolutely applied to the people and social groups of the first century Jewish social world. There were a number of overlapping spectrums of purity. These applied to things like whether you were rich on one end, or poor on the other; whether you were healthy or sick; male or female; righteous or sinful; Jew or Gentile—they all connected into how pure or impure you were. And being a spectrum, you didn’t live at either one end or the other, there were a variety of purity codes that dictated where you existed along that line. Your behaviour mattered. If you carefully observed the purity codes you sat close to that “pure” end of the spectrum. But the most nonobservant were labelled “outcasts” and were treated as such: untouched, unloved, not cared for, and living in the margins.

If anyone observed these purity codes with extreme meticulousness, fervour, and devotion, it was the Jewish religious leaders. They were the elite amongst Jewish society. In part because they followed these purity laws themselves so closely, and in part because they ensured that others were observing the purity laws. Their religious elitism gave them a good deal of power. Interestingly, these religious elites didn’t earn their way into these positions due to their extreme piety or devotion to faith and faith traditions, they were in this priestly class of people because they were born into it. So one’s purity status also depended to some extent on birth.

So when this man with the unclean spirit entered the synagogue he was defying one incredibly important and well-known purity law: only those who are deemed to be pure enough, holy enough, may enter the synagogue, this sacred dwelling place of God. And being demon possessed is certainly not

considered pure. The natural reaction would have been to remove the defiled, impure man from this holy and sacred place. But Jesus reacts quite differently.

Earlier on in the gospel of Mark Jesus proclaims that “the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). And now, here in this synagogue, we have our first glimpse of just what the reign of God really means and what it looks like. Jesus doesn’t only speak with authority, he puts that authority and power into action. The action he takes isn’t to engage the purity laws and send this possessed man away, but to rebuke the evil that has overtaken him and command it to leave.

So what does this scene tell us about the reign of God? About the kingdom of God being near? About the authority which Jesus possesses? Jesus does not use his authority and power in the same way the religious leaders or other first century Jewish people would use it—to emphasize a social worldview where everyone exists on a spectrum of pure and impure. Nor does he use it as a means to overtake the religious leaders or try to “win” more followers. Rather, Jesus uses it as a way to bring God’s kingdom ever nearer to the hearts of those who hear him and see his actions; he teaches and acts with compassion, a compassion that leads to the liberation of this man with the unclean spirit. Liberation from a life categorized as impure; liberation from being an outcast; liberation from an old life of brokenness and induction into a new life of wholeness. For Jesus, compassion replaces purity. Compassion is the dominating characteristic and motivating force of his authority. And this compassion tells us something of who God is, as well.

In Psalm 111, the psalmist presents a hymn of thanksgiving and praise for God and God’s works: God establishes and keeps covenants; God provides food; God sends redemption to God’s people. We also hear of God’s many incredible attributes: God is gracious and merciful. God’s name is holy and awesome. But perhaps the most impressive is that God is not sitting at the “pure” end of any sort of spectrum, away from and above all others. Usually those with such a combination of attributes and accomplishments remain at arm’s length from the masses. But not God; God connects with God’s people and encourages a profound intimacy with those who perform God’s good, compassionate and loving ways with, as the psalm says, “faithfulness and uprightness.”

And now here is Jesus, at the start of his public ministry showing all those in the synagogue what God's attributes—that is, God's love and compassion—are like in action. Jesus uses his power and authority not for the sake of having power, but for the sake of God's kingdom. He takes the form of authority that people are used to engaging with and turns it completely upside down; turns it into a way to include rather than exclude. It is an authority that opens up and invites. Through Jesus, we glimpse characteristics of God's reign. God doesn't punish, but creates routes for liberation and healing. God's reign is about liberating people from powers that afflict them and keep them from flourishing.

But it goes beyond this. It's important that this was done in the synagogue, in a communal gathering place. Because what Jesus was saying and showing wasn't only for the sake of the man with the unclean spirit. No, what Jesus was beginning to roll out was for the community as a whole: Jesus was changing a worldview. He was inviting in a new way, one that took the dominating social vision based in holiness and purity and formed it into a path for an alternative social vision centred in compassion. For Jesus, compassion was more than a quality of God and an individual virtue: it was a new worldview, the core value for life in community.

In our world today we don't have purity laws in the same way that they existed in the first century world, but we do classify one another in limiting and often wounding ways. We are still challenged by whom we think is clean and unclean in our society. We do not react in the same way that Mark's community did, trying to keep the pure and impure separated completely. But we do practice exclusion from our society; even as segregation has supposedly ended or been formally declared illegitimate, we know it is not true in practice. Issues of purity, whether related to race, education, wealth, health, sexuality, or otherwise, still arise and affect our lives and attitudes. What is at stake here is our social worldview; the means by which we include or exclude within our communities, both small and large. What is in question is our ability to live and respond to one another with compassion. What is our vision for those in our community? Is it one of inclusion? Does it promote healing? Liberation? Human flourishing? In other words, is compassion at play?

At Armour Heights we have an Annual General Meeting coming up at the end of February. And as part of that meeting over the past few years—that I've

been present, at least—we have presented and talked about our vision as a church community. We don't do this just because it's good business practice to have a vision, but because we want to remind ourselves to be in the world in compassionate, affirming, and loving ways. Our vision speaks to relationship building, building momentum for faith and hope, creating innovative inroads and connections, and being a centre for outstanding worship, programs, community fellowship, pastoral care, mission partnerships and outreach. Are we there yet? In many ways, yes. But I'd argue that reaching that destination isn't our goal. I think the key to a good vision is that there's always more to do, always further to reach. In our world there will always be more people looking for connection, for healing, for an invitation to be part of a loving community. Our destination isn't fixed, it is ever-evolving to be more inclusive, affirming, and compassionate. It is a vision that grounds us not only as the people of Armour Heights, but as Christians within this greater world.

Jesus uses his authority and power to turn the first century Jewish world on its head—to do away with purity as the social vision and welcome in inclusion, healing, and compassion. During this time of Epiphany we celebrate and consider the means by which Jesus becomes visible and known to the world. It evokes in us a wondering about the ways that Jesus continues to use his authority and power to turn the world—our 21st century world—on its head and upend our assumptions of what is possible with God. Amen.