

What is this - teaching with authority?

Mark 1:21-28

January 31, 2021

The stage has been set, as early as the 2nd Sunday in Advent, Mark wrote “. . . the good news about Jesus the Messiah, ‘the Son of God,’. This authority is reinforced in Mark’s first chapter when Isaiah is quoted, it continues with the testimony of John the Baptist (Mk 1:7-8), carries on through the testimony of God (Mk 1:11), and culminates in Christ’s successful opposition to the wiles of Satan (Mk 1:12-13).

Then last week Brad dealt with the calling of the first disciples. Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee and as he walked, he spoke to Simon and Andrew, “Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people.” “Follow me”, the important words from last week’s sermon.

Now Simon and Andrew knew how to fish, because they had been taught by their father, all the ins and outs, all the secrets of catching fish on the Sea of Galilee; but fish for people, that’s something new! How were they going to fish for people? They would have to be taught, taught by Jesus.

As this week began, I was contemplating focussing on the first two (2) verses of today’s gospel lesson - teaching. But as the week progressed and I did more research, I had a distinct impression that I had to spend some time on the remaining six (6) verses of the pericope. I had to address them some way.

~ ~ Teaching ~ ~

What kind of teaching would Jesus do? Last week, I was talking to a friend and sharing some initiating thoughts about my focus for today’s sermon, I mentioned the word teaching. She introduced me to two Latin words that are related to the idea of teaching - “educari” and “instrucari”. Now if you were asked, you would probably be able to tell me that “educari” is the root for the English word educate and “instrucari” is the root for instruct. The subtleties of “educari” in Latin, have to deal with the drawing something out of a person, while “instrucari” concerns the packing of ‘stuff’ into a student. Which of these words would you use to describe Jesus’ teaching?

As a teacher, I have exploited both teaching methods, “educari” and “instrucari”- I stuffed my grade 4 students with their times tables using games like snap. During bible studies at Gordon, I have tried to draw out a participant’s knowledge - something they may not even know they had. Which of these words would you use to describe Jesus’ teaching method?

Our text finds Jesus arriving on the Sabbath at the synagogue in Capernaum and teaching. Jesus as a teacher is an important piece of Mark’s portrayal of him, even though the Gospel writer is quite obviously less concerned with what he was teaching than with how Jesus was teaching. This Gospel provides no details about the content of Jesus’ teaching, just the fact that it was astounding in its authority. I see Jesus, as an ‘educari’, teaching with authority - which brings us to verse 23, “Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, . . .”

~ ~ Healing ~ ~

Why was a man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue? Ordinarily this would not have occurred, people had to be purified before they entered the synagogue. Was he present as a deliberate provocation to Jesus or was he there so that Jesus could reveal the presence of an unclean spirit in him? No matter why he was there, the authority of Jesus is revealed and his power is demonstrated - all this illuminated what no one had been able to recognize. The spot light illuminates Jesus and startles those who are around him.

What did that man cry out? “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!”

When I read that verse, I see a singular person, the man, and then he refers to “us”. Now Miss Dixon, my grade 9 English teacher, would be proud of me, recognizing that the man was singular and he was referring to the English plural pronoun “us”. Are there more of them, because I know that this man was not referring to himself in the royal sense. Why would the man be using a plural pronoun here?

Who was the man referring to? Was he referring to all the unclean spirits and showing Christ’s power over all of them? Was he referring to all of us, who are not perfect but sometimes we think we are okay, because we attend church?

Does it really matter, because in the end, the spot light goes to Jesus? I’m not sure if Jesus intended the spotlight to be on him, but it sure seems that Mark wanted it on him. There’s a spotlight on Jesus in which authority is illuminated - and authority that in turn illuminates the world as it aligns itself with or does not align itself with God.

The unclean spirit essentially claims to know Jesus - by name, by his home town - when he says, “Jesus of Nazareth . . . the Holy One of God!” William Lane in his commentary on the New Testament wrote, “The recognition formula is not a confession, but a defensive attempt to gain control of Jesus in accordance with the common concept of that day, that the use of the precise name of an individual or spirit would secure mastery over him” (Lane, p. 74).

How does Jesus respond to the unclean spirit that was addressing him? He silences it - “Be quiet! Come out of him!”

Robert Gundry in his book on Mark wrote that the Messianic secret is not present in this dialogue. Now for those who do not know what the Messianic secret is, let me explain. The Messianic secret refers to the fact that Jesus did not want a lot of publicity. You will remember that Jesus frequently tells his disciples to not tell anyone what they have observed. But at this juncture it has been revealed.

Jesus by this experience is rejecting an attempt to manipulate him - control him - not allowing an unclean spirit to claim any authority in its knowledge about Jesus. This is Jesus denying any kind of authority over him just as he denied the tempter - while he was in the wilderness - and telling the devil, “Away from me, Satan!”

Jesus then commands the unclean spirit to come out of the man. Exorcisms were not unknown or even uncommon in Jesus' day. But Jesus did not have to use any specific memorized incantation, or a physical manipulation to remove the unclean spirit. This happens because of Jesus’ own simple but effective command; this demonstrates Christ’s authority.

This is an early story about Jesus, both teaching and doing, and in both cases, Mark seems less concerned with what Jesus was teaching and what Jesus was doing - Mark is more concerned with how Jesus was teaching and how Jesus was doing. In both cases, Jesus' word is the key. Even Jesus' doing is part of his speaking. For what Jesus said, is what is done. Such is the authority of God, is it not.

We are still in the days of Epiphany - the days of “What is this? A new teaching with authority!” The stage is set, and it turns out we are on stage. We, as readers and hearers of Mark's Gospel, have been carefully prepared. Then the spotlight hits us . . . it’s now up to us, “. . . to fish for people!” Amen.