

Sermon: Epiphany 4.

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8: 1-13; Mark 1: 21-28.

When my children were in high school, they came home telling me they had learnt about primary and secondary sources. I remember telling them that I didn't recall learning about sources in high school, or in my first experience of university studies in the 80's.

Perhaps that is because it has become more important in this age of technology and information overload to look at the authority of the source – to check where people get their information from. The internet has complicated matters, and we all know someone who has said that they are convinced of something because they read it online! One of the first things we were told as theological students is not to refer to online sources, rather to use the university library so that we could learn which sources were credible.

The reading from Mark's gospel today is all about authority. The word that we translate as 'authority' in this passage is *exousía*. In the New Testament, this word is in the most part used about God's power, the power given to Jesus, or the power given by Jesus to his disciples. It can also be about the power of government, the power of kings and "the powers that be". It may also denote a sphere of dominion, e.g., the state, the domain of spirits, or the spiritual powers.¹

Mark uses his characteristic brevity when we hear about Jesus' authority: "They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (Mark 1:21). It is easy to think that this means that the scribes were not teaching the correct thing. But if you consider how the scribes would teach, they would draw on the authority of the Torah, or on the rabbinic teachings – quoting Moses, or a particular Rabbi. Jesus' teaching was different, he didn't need to quote sources. You get a real sense of his power in this passage – a power which does not simply come from the word 'authority'.

In the letter from Paul to the church in Corinth we have Paul's response to an issue about people eating meat which was sacrificed to idols. It is not so much the meat that is the problem, rather what the meat represents. Whilst some possess the knowledge of what the meat represents and they can resist the pull back towards idolatry, there are others for whom this is difficult. Paul says that knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. It is not about what we know that counts, but love. People are known by God through their love for God, not their knowledge of God – because it's a relationship. In many ways this reflects the scene in the temple – Jesus speaks from a deep connection with God and not from a learned knowledge – this is the difference between him and the scribes. Our heart is where we know God, not our brain. Additionally, it is in our actions that we show the one who we follow, not in what we say.

We might consider what idols we worship, and how our actions might be viewed by others as that of a church going Christian. A place where I am often judged by others is at the

¹ *exousía*, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT) "Little Kittel" edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985, p.238.

supermarket – people always look at my collar and then glance at my trolley. I am in the habit of buying a certain type of egg – where the conditions for the chicken are better. To the one that glances in my trolley - am I being kind and loving to the animal, wasteful with money, concerned about my health or out of touch with those who struggle to put food on the table?

We have a similar theme in the reading from Deuteronomy. “If there is to be one through whom God speaks the word that is to be obeyed and the word that uncovers the future work of God, how will the people know who that one is, especially if there are various persons, as indeed there were in the community, claiming so to speak? The problem of false prophecy was a real one.”² In verse 20 we hear of the issue of prophets speaking in the name of other gods. This reflects the ongoing concern of the intrusion of other gods seeking Israel’s allegiance. We too hear conflicting voices in our attempts to hear the voice of God and discern the future work of God.

This reading not only talks about the words of the prophet, but the need to heed them. Again, we have the call to live our lives in a way that reflects the one we follow.

If we go back to the sources, of course the gospel of Mark is a primary source. If we are going to live our lives in a way that reflects the one we follow, then it is important to pay attention to what the gospels tell us about Jesus. And Mark sure packs a punch – few words, but much to ponder.

“Mark’s Jesus is not for the casual Christian who is glad to give Jesus an affectionate nod and happy to have Jesus as an occasional colleague. From (the first verse of chapter 1), the narrator tells us that with the reign of God set loose in the world, no sphere of authority/power will hold sway against the divine authority/power of Jesus. In Mark’s Gospel Jesus is no one’s colleague or buddy or chum. Jesus is “the Christ,” “the Son of God”³. In Mark we encounter a Jesus with power and purpose, who liberates us “from all that constrains and corrupts us so that we can live into our God given fullness.”⁴

We don’t hear from Mark what Jesus taught in the synagogue, just that he astonished his listeners. He then goes straight into the account with the man with the unclean spirit. In Mark we not only hear about the teachings of Jesus, but we also see them - teaching and healing go hand in hand. Jesus’ teaching astounds his listeners, but it is the casting out of the unclean spirit which fills them with amazement. His words caused something to happen. Mark’s Jesus shows us a new way of teaching, a new way of living. It is not just information, but transformation. And we are not even at the end of Chapter 1 yet!

I will leave you with a couple of questions to ponder. How can Mark’s Jesus make a difference in our world? If we are called to live our lives in a way that reflects the one we follow, how are we transformed by our encounter with Mark’s Jesus?

² Patrick D Millar. *Deuteronomy: Interpretation Bible Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012, p.152.

³ GW Charles, *Feasting on the Gospels*, entry on Mark 1:21-28. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013

⁴ Sue Lodge-Calvert. Reflection for Epiphany 4. <https://www.companionsontheway.com/post/set-free>