

He taught them with authority...

4th Sunday per annum B

Mk 1: 21 – 28

His teaching made a deep impression on them because, unlike the scribes, he taught them with authority.

There was a crisis of authority in the Jewish world at the time of Jesus, as this text from Mark suggests. It is not hard to understand why: the Roman occupation had fractured the leadership in Jewish society. There were the Sadducees and priests who were compromised by their deal with the Romans: to accept Roman rule – and in particular to pay Roman taxes – in return for freedom to practise their religion, and to have a certain local autonomy, with limits, under the puppet regime of Herod. On the other hand, you had the scribes and Pharisees, who sought to remain pure by keeping their distance from the Romans, but at the same time not rocking the boat. And then there were fringe groups, like the Zealots who were plotting armed insurrection, and the Essenes, who took themselves off to live a rather bizarre and extremely ascetic life in the desert.

You can't imagine such a society today ... or can you ?.

In this fractured and troubled world, Jesus clearly stood out. He was perhaps closer to the Pharisees than any other group, but he was not really to be identified with them. Mark says he spoke *with authority*. This is clearly not authority in the sense of civil or religious power or office. Rather, it refers to Jesus personal authority, his authority as a teacher. He did not seek conflict, but he was not frightened to challenge the authorities of the day, religious or secular, Roman or Jewish, when they stood in the way of his acts of kindness (like curing the crippled) or his occasional criticism – though he seems to have been far less outspoken than John the Baptist, for example – of corrupt practices.

Of course, as the Son of God, Jesus was uniquely placed to speak with authority, absolute authority. But we might ask, "Is it possible for anyone to speak with authority, even relative authority, today?"

I first really thought about this when I began teaching at Blackfriars, our school in Adelaide. Some teachers obviously had an authority the moment they entered the classroom; others really struggled. I wondered, what made the difference? Certainly it had a lot to do with psychology – it was essential to

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project an image of confidence in oneself in order to gain the confidence of the pupils – but there was another element, which I would call “authenticity”. Authentic teachers know their subject well, of course, they know what they are talking about – but also they are honest, they are straight in the answers they give to their pupils. If they don’t know an answer, they say so. If a student points out that they have made an error, as sometimes happens, they thank the student and make the correction. And above all else, they live by what they teach. If they profess to teach respect for others, they show it to their pupils.

Jesus total authenticity was ultimately shown, of course, by his death and resurrection: his faithfulness to the message of salvation which he preached, and his victory over death witnessed by the apostles and others to whom he appeared.

Deuteronomy, chapter 10, gives a simple rule for determining the truth of a prophecy:

When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously, you need not be afraid of him.

And Jesus himself said,

By your fruits you will know them.

He had prophesied “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.”

And John comments,

He spoke of the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.

We, as frail human beings, can never speak with the absolute authority, the absolute authenticity of Jesus. Nevertheless, our challenge as Christians, as other Christs, is to live lives of authenticity, with the help and power of his grace.

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