

Sermon - authority in word and deed

Based on Deuteronomy 18.15-20 and Mark 1.21-28 (NRSV)

Moses the prophet

- The reading from Deuteronomy is supposedly in the voice of Moses, the great prophet-leader of the people of God
 - - the first who is empowered to say: *'Thus says the Lord God ...'*
 - - and the first who prays to God on behalf of God's people, not just on behalf of himself.
- Moses reminds the Israelites of what happened on Mount Horeb, when Moses went up the mountain to receive God's law.
- There was fire, and the voice of God was heard in the thunder, and the people were mortally afraid at this manifestation of God's presence.
- So they pleaded, through God's servant Moses, that they not be exposed in this way to God's fearful presence.
- God therefore reassured them, through Moses, that after Moses other prophets would be raised up, in order to speak God's word to the people, and to speak the people's word to God.
- When Moses says: *The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people (Deuteronomy 18.25)*,
 - then the understanding is not that there would be only one prophet to succeed Moses, but the reference is to the function of a prophet, as in: 'there will always be a prophet to speak God's word to you.'
- This is a reassurance they are given.

Speaking the Word of God

- Nevertheless, both the people and those who are deemed to be prophets, whether genuine and false, are also given warnings.
- Those people of God who don't listen to and respond proactively to God's word as spoken to them by prophets, will be held to account directly by God.
- And those prophets, regardless of whether they are genuine or false prophets, who speak what is not God's word, will die.
- We don't presume that they will necessarily die physically, but their falsehood that they claim to be of God, disconnects them from the source of life: their connection and communion with God is disrupted so that their faith-relationship dies.
- When the book Deuteronomy was written - centuries after Moses - there had already been many prophets, both true and false, and the people of God had frequently not heeded the words of the true prophets.
- So the authors of Deuteronomy recognised that prophets were frequently persecuted and their words often unheeded or rejected.
- Even so, this did not change their understanding about God's promises and reassurance that God would continue both to reach out to his people, and also that people would suffer the obvious consequences of turning away from the source of all love, light and life.
- Now, even though we understand that these words in Deuteronomy refer to the function of prophecy, that is manifested by a prophet from time to time - as Christians we are also mindful of the ultimate prophet, Jesus Christ.
- In fact, Jesus is named as the Word of God, and thus every prophet who spoke God's word *truly* - or who speaks it now, or who will speak it - is thus speaking the Word of God.
- Since Jesus was before all time, and is raised to the throne of heaven for evermore, everyone who ever *truly* speaks God's word, speaks the Word of God, the Word of Christ himself.

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Amongst the scribes

- Which brings us to today's Gospel reading from Mark.
- We are still working through the first chapter - in fact, we've only had twenty verses which cover John the Baptist, the baptism and temptation of Jesus, and the calling of the first four disciples.
- And now Jesus and his disciples arrive at Capernaum, and he goes to the synagogue and teaches those who have come there.
- Mark is not interested here in *what* Jesus says, but rather in *how* Jesus speaks.
- The scribes are people who are learned in the scriptures, who seek after God's word as revealed through the sacred writings of their forebears, and who study it not only for their own edification, but also to enable others to learn through them.
- So they teach people from the scriptures, and do so with the recognised authority of the renowned rabbis they themselves have learnt from.
- In short, they have the authority and credentials to be recognised as scribes and thus teachers of scripture.

The Usain Bolt of the scribes

- And among them comes Jesus.
- Mark gives us a powerful description of the impact of the teaching of Jesus: compared to the scribes, Jesus has an obvious authority in expounding holy scripture.
- It's a bit like having people do the hundred metre sprint.
- Anyone who can run, can do it.
- And then there are professional sprinters, who leave everyone else in the dust.
- And then along comes Usain Bolt, who leaves even the professional sprinters in the dust.
- And when people witness that, their jaws drop in amazement: they are astounded.
- This is the kind of mind-blowing authority that Jesus exhibits in his exposition of scripture.
- It's like a light has gone on in people's minds.
- And, for those who are open to it, a deeper comprehension of God's love for them.
- And for those who too easily practise deceit, a confrontation with truth.

The stronger man

- In this moment someone, who is harbouring a spiritual force that is fundamentally ungodly, calls out:
'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' (Mark 1.24)
- Here I am reminded of what James says in his letter, when he admonishes those who say they have faith, but don't enact it.
- James says: *You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe - and shudder.* (James 2.19)
- Evil spirits recognise the power and presence of God more easily than we do, and quail because they are faced with something - or someone - whose very presence overcomes them, as simply as light overcomes darkness.
- The first thing Jesus does is to forbid the evil spirit to speak.
- Even when evil spirits speak the truth, that can still be destructive if what is true is spoken inappropriately, out of turn.
- Silencing the evil spirit effectively binds its ability.
- Again, I am reminded of a teaching Jesus gives later in Mark's account, when he says:

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'no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.' (Mark 3.27)

- In this act of silencing the evil spirit, Jesus is the one who ties up the metaphorical strong man.
- Indeed, in this Jesus reveals the power of his authority from God, and is thus able to deliver the man from what has possessed him.

The reality of evil

- I am going to say a few words about evil spirits, to provide a context.
- Firstly, it would appear that some descriptions of such apparent spirits in the Bible would today perhaps be recognised as different forms of mental illness, or issues such as epilepsy.
- However, it is extremely unwise to dismiss all, or even most, of these descriptions in this way.
- Secondly, Hollywood films have turned the concept of having an evil spirit into entertainment, in a way that is sensationalised, and also easily dismissed.
- It is equally unwise to treat evil in this way, and thus disregard its reality.
- Some of you might have encountered the helpful book *The Road Less Traveled*, by M Scott Peck, who died in 2005.
- A psychiatrist who was also a Christian, after many years of counselling Peck came to recognise the reality of evil in the behaviour of some of his patients.
- He made a study of this from a psychological perspective, and concluded that evil, and evil forces, were a genuine reality, that needed to be countered very circumspectly.
- He made a point of saying that people who harboured such evil still needed to be loved for themselves - though not for the evil they had permitted to inhabit them, whether wilfully or inadvertently.
- There is much that can be said about the ministry of deliverance, but this knowledge is easily abused, and the teaching and learning should be undertaken neither lightly nor eagerly.
- It is enough for now to say that Jesus' encounter with the unclean spirit - a spirit that renders a person unable to engage with God - would have been a real event that we would be unwise to dismiss lightly.

The reality of Jesus for us

- What I can conclude with is this:
- In this story Jesus shows himself to both teach and act with a spiritual authority that astounds those who witness it.
- He encounters the metaphorical strong man in the form of the evil spirit, and proves himself to be the stronger man.
- This informs his disciples - both those first disciples and us here as some of his twenty-first century disciples - that Jesus speaks the word of God, because he is the Word of God.
- And as the writers of Deuteronomy make clear, we would be wise to heed the words and the teaching of Jesus the prophet.
- Furthermore, if Jesus is the stronger man in terms of his power over forces that damage and break our relationships - our relationships with God, with others, and even with ourselves -
- then it makes sense that we ask Jesus to exercise that same power over our own lives, to deliver us from all that is destructive to ourselves and to our relationships.
- Our faith in Jesus Christ is not a passive or academic one.
- Rather it is an active faith that recognises and acknowledges the authority that Jesus has in teaching us, and in enabling us to engage truly with the source of love, light and life.

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So may you encounter Jesus as the Word of God, and recognise his divine authority.

May you heed his teachings as someone who speaks words of love, words of enlightenment, words of life.

May you know the power of Jesus to keep you safe from harm, and to deliver you from evil.

And may you be blessed in your faith in and through him - in whose name I speak. Amen.