

Fourth Sunday of the year: Teaching with Authority 29 Jan 2012

All Gospel commentators will tell you that there is a powerful urgency in Mark's writing style in his Gospel. It is something that we easily miss because of the way we read the Bible. Because we use a lectionary, we read the Bible in small doses. We take a verse, or section or maybe a chapter of scripture and read it to gain insight for our daily living. We can call this devotional reading and it is quite valuable to the soul. But if we look at the sweep of the story we will see different aspects of the scriptural truth.

Imagine for a moment that you are doing a UCT Summer School Course called "Mark's Gospel 101". If we look at the beginning of Mark's Gospel more from a literary perspective we will see more of what the author intended.

We would note that the first chapter of Mark is very compact and action oriented. In a mere 28 sentences, we have the ministry of John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus, the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, the arrest of John, the calling of the disciples, and this first episode of teaching and healing in the synagogue in Capernaum. That's six scenes in 28 sentences. Mark is certainly in a hurry to tell this story. Matthew and Luke take almost 5 chapters to get to this point. The second thing we would note in our imaginary literature class is that the most common word in this first chapter is "immediately." How often do you use the word "immediately"? As many as four times in 28 short sentences? In Mark's entire Gospel, the word "immediately" appears 31 times in only 15 chapters. It is used more than the words faith, hope and love. So let me assure you Mark is not writing "War and Peace," his writing style is more like a car chase scene from some "skop, skiet en donner" thriller!

The bottom line is that Mark is telling us that Jesus is a man on a mission. At times we can see Jesus as a teacher, a contemplative, someone who takes the time to listen, but here in Mark's Gospel, Jesus is action-oriented. And our Gospel text today bears this out. We read that Jesus amazed people with his teaching. He teaches as one with authority. However, we aren't told a single word about his teaching. In fact, in the entire Gospel of Mark, there is only one major parable, the parable of the sower. If you want to know what Jesus taught, you better go to Matthew and Luke. Mark is telling us how Jesus lived and how he died.

Now, we don't know what he said in the Capernaum Synagogue but it was certainly spoken with authority. What does that mean - "with authority"? Let's consider some alternative kinds of authority Jesus may have had.

Maybe Jesus displayed the kind of authority that comes from talking really loudly. I'm sure you know the sort of people that use that kind of authority? In the middle of a discussion, you find one person expressing their point of view louder and louder, apparently assuming that the one who talks loudest has the most authoritative point of view. And the weaker their position, the louder they talk. But I find it hard to imagine Jesus in a yelling match.

Maybe Jesus pulled rank. Many people love to drop names of the important people they know. Maybe Jesus got his authority by referring often to his relationship with God. He might have said, "Now you people better listen carefully to what I say because I know people who know people. In fact, I know the Numero Uno, so you'd better pay attention or God's gonna get you." Mmmm, I don't think so.

Maybe Jesus flaunted his CV showing off his qualifications. Many of us try to gain a little authority by adding a few letters after our name which reflects our education and training. Now while in some cases this is important so that we can be re-assured that these professionals are qualified to do what they are doing; I sort of doubt that Jesus' business card read, "Jesus, S.O.G (Son of God)", don't you?

I suspect that Jesus' authority didn't come from any of those sources. Instead, Jesus perfectly blended four sources of authority; the same four sources of authority are available to every Christian today. Three of these sources make up the classical 'authority' in Anglicanism today – the famous three-legged stool scenario and the fourth source is most certainly present in the Anglican Church as well.

So, what was Jesus' authority? Firstly, the Bible. Jesus used the Bible that was available to Him - the Hebrew Bible or what we commonly call the Old Testament. Jesus used the authority of the Bible in his teaching. We find Jesus making lots of references to passages in the Hebrew Bible. We can tell that he knew it well. In fact, when he was twelve years old, he spoke to the leaders of the Temple explaining the meaning of the Scriptures.

Even in the three-legged stool scenario, the Bible is our number one source of authority. We today have not only the Hebrew Bible that Jesus used, but also all the stories of Jesus and the early Church as recorded in the New Testament. And Paul writing to Timothy says, "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work."

But the danger is that Christians are tempted to say that the Bible is the **only** source of authority one needs. Although there is some value in the old saw, "The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it", there are some places and issues that God has not given us a clear cut answer in the Bible. If you look at the differences between the various denominations, all of whom still proclaim the Bible as their authority, you will see opposite viewpoints being justified from the biblical texts, and the amazing thing is that all denominations claim the same authority for their faith and practice - the Bible.

The interesting thing about the Gospel passage from Mark is that it makes it clear that that was not Jesus' method! His authority was "not like that of the Scribes." The Scribes used to pile one Scripture proof text upon another and quoted one ancient rabbi after another to prove their logical positions. I suspect that their mental gymnastics didn't mean much to the people in the pews in that synagogue at Capernaum. But those same people noticed immediately that Jesus didn't do that. His authority did not come from quoting the Bible the way most of us try to build up our authority today. Jesus must have appealed through some other source of authority, and so must we.

The second source of authority for the Christian is the Holy Spirit. Obviously, the Spirit of God anointed Jesus with a unique authority. Jesus freely interpreted and added to the scriptures from the Hebrew Bible. Jesus came with a fresh word from God. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus quotes a number of commandments and gives his interpretation of them. Remember how he put it? "You have heard it said 'You shall not commit murder'...But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment." "You have heard it said 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' but I say to you...if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." "And you have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy,' but I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

But it wasn't only Jesus who was led by the Holy Spirit to re-interpret things. Simon Peter responded to the creative leadership of the Spirit when he saw the vision of the sheet being lowered filled with unclean animals and the voice saying, "Rise and eat" In the same way, Paul, a Pharisee of the Pharisees knew that the faith was primarily for the Jewish people and others could only be admitted by circumcision but then the Holy Spirit spoke to him and called him to be an Apostle to the Gentiles, and explained that salvation comes by faith and not works. So too in the past century, the Holy Spirit led Christian people to conclude that slavery was wrong. A large number of preachers had defended slavery and also apartheid using the Bible, but the Holy Spirit convinced most people that both were wrong. We believe in a God who still speaks today through the Holy Spirit. That still small voice that can be a powerful source of authority.

The third source of authority is reason. God does not expect us to hang up our brains with our hats at the door of the church. We are supposed to use our God-given talents to reason and to understand. I pretty sure that this was the unique appeal of Jesus. When the people heard the scribes teaching, they were confused and burdened with the minutia and ritual required to be right with God. When Jesus taught, the people understood him and saw the

wisdom of what he said. Jesus' words were filled with common sense. When we read the parables of Jesus we can glimpse the striking contrast between his authority and the authority of the scribes. Jesus' home-grown stories made immediate connection with the people where they were. The people immediately saw the sense in what he said, and thus proclaimed his authority.

The final source of authority is experience. We have to test what others say and see if it rings true to our experience. Sometimes you hear someone say something so profound that you just know it is true. It's true because it resonates with your experience of the world. I believe the teachings of Jesus passed this test of authority as well. When the non-academic people, people seeking health, happiness and wholeness, heard the teachings of Jesus, they knew from their own experience that what he said was true. They knew that the Pharisees were heaping unnecessary requirements upon the faith. They knew deep down within themselves that the way to God proclaimed by the scribes did not work for them. And so when Jesus came proclaiming an intimate relationship with God, they knew he was right.

I've given four ways of authority that Jesus used. And we can and must use them too. But let me warn you that using any one of these sources alone can lead you astray. When the Bible is used alone as a source of authority, bible idolatry results. When the Holy Spirit is used alone, emotionalism prevails. When reason is used alone, philosophy reigns. When experience is used alone, humanism emerges. But used together, these four sources of authority make a reliable method of finding what is true and right. This is what Mark is trying to do with this passage. He is presenting the tools of authority that Jesus uses through the remainder of Mark's gospel and we must be on the look out for this and see how we can use these in our life and our witnessing to Jesus.