
GOD'S WORD HAS BOTH POWER AND AUTHORITY
Sermon for the 4th Sunday after the Epiphany, 2018
Mark 1:21-28

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Gospel read before, Mark 1:21-28: ²¹ **They went to Capernaum. On the next Sabbath, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach.** ²² **The people were amazed at His teaching. For He was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes taught.** ²³ **Just then there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit, and he cried out,** ²⁴ **“What do we have in common with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are, the Holy One of God!”**

²⁵ **Jesus spoke sharply to him: “Be quiet, and come out of him!”**

²⁶ **The unclean spirit shook the man violently and with a loud shriek came out of him.** ²⁷ **The people were all so amazed that they debated with one another: “What is this? This is a new teaching, with authority! He even gives orders to the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.”**

²⁸ **The news about Him spread quickly everywhere through the surrounding region of Galilee.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The Scripture readings from last Sunday had much to say about the power of God's spoken Word. When the Lord speaks His Word - those words have the power to affect changes in things, in people, in whatever it is He speaks to - changes that would not or could not happen *apart* from the power of God's Word.

From last Sunday's First Reading¹, God called the prophet Jonah to speak His words of impending judgment to the people of Nineveh. In Jonah's day, Nineveh was what Rome was in the days of Jesus' ministry: the centre of all earthly power and glory. The Ninevites were pagan people who attributed their great success to a number of false gods. They didn't know the one true God; and even if some did, they weren't too worried about Him, seeing as how they had conquered His people in the nation of Israel. They figured that if He were much of a God at all, then He certainly would not have allowed that to happen. So, along comes Jonah to tell them that they'd better repent and to do it quickly because if they failed to, the God of Israel would wipe them out.

Now, you'd think that Jonah's words would have sounded to them like some kind of joke, but that's not how they reacted. In hearing Jonah,⁵ *The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them...* (Jonah 3:5). Their response was amazing - a compelling demonstration of the power of God's Word to change the hearts of sinful people.

The other example we saw last week came from the Gospel.² That had to do with Jesus gathering some of His first disciples. Can you remember that He finds them at work, fishing and mending their nets, going about their daily duties. Suddenly Jesus walks up and says, "*Come and follow Me!*" What is their response? They immediately stop what they are doing and follow Him. They don't know where they're going, they don't know for how long; yet they turn their backs on everything they know and worked for, and enrol in Jesus' seminary.

Now, it is important to understand that the story is not about their remarkable willingness to follow Jesus; but rather about the power of the call of Jesus that overcomes their natural objections and compels

¹ Jonah 3:1-5, 10

² Mark 1:14-20

them to get up and follow wherever He leads. We experience in our lives that same divine power when we hear or read the Word of God. Through the Word the Holy Spirit has called us to repentance and has given us the gift of faith, and through the Word He continues to cleanse our lives and build us up in spiritual virtues – which is why we want to continue to subject ourselves to the Word, so that God’s powerful work in us will be made complete.

Expanding a bit on the idea of the power of God’s Word, some of today’s readings highlight its authority. The two concepts, power and authority, are related and naturally go together; but they are not the same thing. Power speaks of having the necessary force to influence things and make changes. Authority has to do with legitimacy. It brings to the table such ideas as truthfulness, correctness, integrity, and the right to exercise power and make changes.

The following is a good illustration of this. What do you think would happen if I was to go to the local watchhouse and order the policeman on duty to release all the prisoners in his custody? I’m pretty sure he’d tell me to go away. Why? Because I haven’t got the authority to give that order and he knows it. My orders would be just words, empty words. But if I then pulled a gun on him and said, “*If you don’t release the prisoners, I’m going to shoot you*” I’m sure I would get more of a response! That’s because the gun and the threat to use it give a certain power of influence to my words. The trouble is that it’s an illegitimate power. Even though I have the power to make him do what I want, I still haven’t got the authority. So, with my power I might make a change; but that change wouldn’t last. After we got away the police would simply round up the prisoners again and put me in there with them. Then I would have neither authority nor power. But if, on the other hand, right from the start, I came to the watchhouse with a court order signed by the judge who had oversight for such matters, to release the prisoners, there would have been no problem. Why? It’s because the

judge's position and office give his words the proper authority to exercise the power to direct confinement and release.

The point to be made is that God's Word has both power and authority. *Power*, because through it He exercises His creative force and controlling design over all things; but its *authority* comes from who He is: The Lord and King of creation; and for us, our God and Father.

Now, with all this in mind, let's turn our attention to this morning's Gospel lesson in which we find Jesus teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

It was standard procedure for Jesus during His earthly ministry to go to the synagogues where the people gathered on the Sabbath and be the guest speaker for the day. He'd read a passage of God's Word from the Scriptures and then explain what it meant; that is, He'd preach a sermon. Today we are told that the **people were amazed at His teaching. For He was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes taught.**

That was amazing because back then a lot of the teaching you were likely to hear at a synagogue was anything but authoritative. If you had a theological question and went to your resident rabbi to get it answered, he would answer it by appealing to some interpretation made by a past rabbi. He'd likely tell you that the famous rabbi so-and-so once said this, and that rabbi what's-his-name said that, and so on it would go. After getting a lot of contradicting opinions, you were pretty much left to sort it out for yourself. Now, it's likely that your rabbi would indicate his leaning in the matter; but he would likely avoid making any definitive statements.

The same thing happened when the rabbis and scribes got together to discuss teachings and doctrines. They'd quibble and argue and muster quotations from their favourite teachers of the past, and express their own pious opinions, but they'd never really settle anything, and every

subject imaginable was up for grabs. Take a simple question like the resurrection of the dead on the Last Day. Some rabbis said yes, there would definitely be a resurrection; others said no. So, if they couldn't get a simple one like that straight, you can imagine how confused their answers for more complicated and controversial questions were. Of course, the net effect of all of this was that God's powerful and authoritative Word was overlaid by a thick layer of human opinions and arguments and traditions that carried the pretence of spirituality because they made allusions here and there to what was written in Scripture. But all that accumulated and so-called wisdom were just empty human words that robbed God's Word and the people who heard it of its true meaning and power.

That's what made the teaching of Jesus so startlingly and refreshingly different. He didn't weigh in with the various opinions of the rabbis about what this or that passage meant. No, He kept His teaching direct and simple, and for a good example of Jesus' preaching style, we only need to look at the Sermon on the Mount.³ There we see Jesus repeatedly using this formula, "*You have heard it said... but I tell you this.* For example, He'll say, "*You have heard it said, 'Don't murder', but I tell you that being angry with your brother is the same as murdering him.*" Or, "*You have heard it said, 'Don't commit adultery'; but I tell you that to look at someone with lust in your heart is adultery.*" Or, "*You have heard it said, 'Love your friends and hate your enemies'; but I tell you to love our enemies and do good to those who hurt and despise you for by so doing you show yourselves to be children of your Father in heaven who causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on both the wicked and the righteous.*" That's how Jesus taught. By speaking in this way, Jesus cut straight through all that clutter and confusion of just words that obscured the true intent and

³ Matthew 5ff

meaning of God's Word. *He spoke with authority: His own authority*, and He could do it because in a very real sense, *He is the very Word of God*. In preaching the Word of God, Jesus was talking about *Himself*.

Can you therefore see what the affect of such authoritative preaching is: an unclean spirit that dwells within a man who's listening to Jesus becomes unsettled and begins to cry out in fear, and you should know that what's cast in the text as a question is more likely a statement of fact. The spirit says, **“What do we have in common with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are, the Holy One of God!”**

What's so intriguing about this story is that the unclean spirit is there at all. Here we've got a man who's at the synagogue on the Sabbath, and yet he is possessed by a demon. You'd think that a synagogue or church is the last place you'd expect to find him. Having a demon as he does, you'd think he'd be far away from the synagogue, preferring to be out in some dark, evil place. But that's wrong. In truth, the place where God's people assemble is one of the *best places* for unclean spirits to hide. This is especially the case when the messages typically proclaimed there are just words: lots of theological fluff and drivel with no clear answers about anything. In such environments unclean spirits can thrive because there is no threat to them. The words of God are obscured and so are emptied of their power.

Not today: the authoritative and hard-hitting message of Jesus that calls sin what it is without waffling or equivocation and that shines the bright and white hot divine light on what's concealed in the dark hearts of men gives the unclean spirit no place to hide. So, when it cries out, Jesus orders the spirit to **“Be quiet, and come out of him!”** – which it must do, for the words of Jesus carry the power *and* the authority to condemn and to set free, to bless and to curse. With just His word, He can do it all.

That is good news for us, because even after some 2000 years His words have lost none of their power or authority – so long as we keep them as just His words without adding or subtracting from them. We have come along today where we sit in the assembly of God’s people to hear the words of Jesus, and the truth is that there are at least as many unclean spirits here today as there are people present. No, I’m not saying that we’re all demon possessed; I’m speaking of the unclean spirits of the sinful natures that inhabit each of us. These are what must be upset, revealed, driven out, and destroyed by the clear and authoritative teaching of Jesus, and it’s here that we have to be careful.

The demon in the story doesn’t want to go. It cries out and makes lots of loud horrible noises as it resists – just like the sinful nature in each of us. It wants to stay. It wants to be comfortable and unchallenged and go on living within us, even while outwardly we go through the motions of living the Christian life. In order for it to do this, it must water down, distort, or discredit the authority of God’s Word, or it must mound up steaming piles of human wisdom on top of the Word that cover its truth and obscure it. That’s what the rabbis had done in Jesus’ day, and that’s goes on today as well. People today continue to make the effort to undermine the authority of God’s Word so that we, mere humans, could be ourselves the final judges of truth and error, and of right and wrong. The trouble is we don’t have that authority - it belongs to God alone.

So, the battle goes on. We see evidence of it wherever people in the church are resisting the truth and authority of God’s Word. We see it where the clear, hard-hitting teaching of Jesus has been replaced by sermons with lots of emotional fluff and chicken-soup-for-the-soul stories that can make people laugh or cry; but that never really addresses the problem of the sin in our hearts. We see it in the kind of Bible studies that encourage the participants to share their experiences and answer questions like, “*What does this passage mean to you? How does it make you feel?*” when the question ought to be, “*What is God saying*”

to us here?" We see it in the gospel of self-esteem messages proclaimed by so many popular television evangelists who teach us to love ourselves because we're basically good and we deserve it, and the messages of churches that proclaim the "come as you are gospel" which says "We accept everyone no matter what sin you involved in. Don't worry: you won't be challenged, your sin won't be condemned, your false gods won't be expelled. Just come and be part of our family."

No, we can be thankful that we belong to a church and tradition that upholds the absolute authority of Jesus' teaching and God's Word, where, as painful as it is, we are constantly confronted by the unpleasant truth of the uncleanness and darkness that dwells within us. We can be thankful too that Jesus continues to speak to us today with authority to reveal the sin in our hearts. It's good for us, because with the same authority He has to declare what's wrong with us, He also declares us to be righteous for His sake. If He had no authority, we could never be sure of where we stood with God. But the same Jesus who condemns the unclean spirit in us assures us with absolute authority that He has paid the penalty for us – that His death for sin is reckoned as our own, and that His resurrection guarantees our resurrection to eternal life. That's what destroys the unclean spirit and gives life and strength to the new, clean, godly nature that through His powerful and authoritative Word He is even now creating and growing within us. That's what gives the ability to say with His authority, "*Your sins are forgiven*" and for the pastor to say, "*This is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus, given and shed for the forgiveness of your sins.*" They are just words; but they are the words of Christ with the power and authority of God Himself and by which you can be sure that He counts you as just and righteous in His sight.

Mark says that when they heard him, **the people were all so amazed that they debated with one another: "What is this?"** We too ought to be amazed, for it is by the authority of His words of grace and

forgiveness that we are saved, and for which we owe Him our thanks and praise for ever. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Almighty God, Your ears are always open to the prayers of Your people, and You promise Your saving help in every time of need. Therefore we lift up our hearts to You.

We thank and praise You that You have enabled us to understand Your Word, and for the blessings of faith, love, and trust in You. Most of all, we thank and praise You for the coming of Your Son, and for His deliverance from our sin, from the condemnation of the Law, from our death, from the devil, and from hell. We give You humble thanks for all Your other gifts.

You have bestowed Your Spirit on us through Jesus, Your holy Anointed One. Through Your Spirit give us a deeper knowledge of Your will, and a deeper faith in Your salvation. Continue to renew us by the Spirit also. Give us deeper love for all people. Keep us conscious of Your desire that we should spread the Good News about Jesus. Give us opportunities to tell the good news of the Gospel, and the courage to tell it; and strengthen us by the presence of Jesus, who has promised to be with us always in this task. Make us more aware of people's needs, that, in meeting them, they may see that we are credible witnesses of Him; and bless what we say.

We pray also for all our families. Bless each home with Your presence and the Spirit of Christ, that children may grow in favour with God and man, and that parents, by love and proper example, may maintain their homes in godliness. Grant that both children and parents may be eager to worship You and may delight in serving Your Son in their daily lives.

Provide and maintain good government for us and for all people; give all in our nation high moral values and responsible citizenship.

Comfort and bless all among us who are afflicted in any way, that they may find release from their burdens and trials, and learn to know Your gracious will, and how to submit to it.

Look with mercy upon the parched land and send to us drought-breaking rain.

May we all, in the unity of the faith, and in the knowledge of Your Son, continually praise Your name and fulfil Your saving purposes in the world. We ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

¹⁵ “The LORD, your God, will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among you, from your fellow-Israelites. You shall listen to Him! ¹⁶ This is exactly what you asked from the LORD, your God, at Horeb, on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear the voice of the LORD, my God, any more or see this great fire any more, that I may not die!’

¹⁷ “The LORD told me, ‘What they have said is good. ¹⁸ I shall raise up for them a Prophet like you, from among their fellow-

Israelites. I shall put My Words in His mouth, and He will tell them everything that I command Him. ¹⁹ I Myself shall call to account any person who does not listen to My Words, which He speaks in My name. ²⁰ However, that prophet who acts insolently by speaking anything in My name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, shall die!’

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

¹ Now concerning the meat sacrificed to idols: We know that all of us have some knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ² The

person who thinks that he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know.³ However, if anyone loves God, God knows him.⁴ Therefore, about eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one.⁵ For, even if there are so-called “gods,” either in heaven or on earth (as there are many “gods” and many “lords”),⁶ yet for us there is only one God, the Father, from whom all things come, and we exist for Him; and there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things come, and we exist through Him.

⁷ However, not everyone knows this. Some are still now so accustomed to an idol that they think about the meat that they eat as something that has been sacrificed to an idol, and, since their consciences are weak, they are defiled.⁸ Food will not commend us to God. We lose nothing if we do not eat, and gain nothing if we do eat.⁹

However, beware that somehow this liberty of yours does not become the thing that causes weak people to stumble!¹⁰ For, if anyone who is weak sees you, who have this knowledge, sitting at a meal in a temple of an idol, will not his conscience be encouraged to eat the meat that has been sacrificed to idols?

¹¹ For the weak person is being destroyed by your knowledge, your fellow-Christian, for whom Christ died.¹² However, when you sin against your fellow-Christians in this way and wound their weak consciences, you sin against Christ.¹³

Therefore, if food causes my fellow-Christian to stumble, I shall certainly never eat meat, that I may not cause my fellow-Christian to stumble.

Mark 1:21-28

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