**29th January 2012**

**Mark 1.21-28**

Over the next three Sundays we will be looking at the healing ministry of Jesus. Our passage today sees Jesus start his healing ministry curing the sick and casting out demons. It raises issue of authority and power and the nature of Christ’s healing ministry.

This passage has a huge understatement. The people in the congregation, having witnessed a scene to rival anything in The Exorcist, look around at each other and say, "What is this? ... A new teaching!"

A new teaching? If this had happened in any congregation I know, they may have sat for hours in stupefied silence, they may have go down on their knees in sudden repentance, or they may have jumped out of the church windows in terror, but the last thing they would have done was to comment on how this casting out of a demon constituted an innovation in Christian education. A new teaching? Indeed.

Christ's teaching, on the other hand, transform us. You could describe this as a new teaching but better yet describe it as God with us. For if God is with us, that changes everything. That’s all about authority.

We all know a great deal about the dynamics of authority and power. We have experienced it in our fam­ilies, in our workplaces, and in our com­munities. we know what it means to have authority or be denied authority, to delegate authority, to answer to one who has authority, and, sometimes, to claim authority. We have probably seen the effects of authority that has been helpful, offering guidance and dir­ection with respect and integrity. We have also probably seen the effects of the misuse of power and authority, when an individual’s rights and needs are not respected.

*For groups to work they often need to authorise people to act in a leadership position. But power always needs to be held to accvount oterwsie it can become tyrannical and oppressive. In half an hour’s time we will exercise ethe authority of the church meting. That is how we make joint decisions in this church so that power does not reside in the hands of just individuals but is shared by the whole community*.

Jesus had a God-given authority, an authority that was noticeably different to that demonstrated by other authority figures of the time. Rabbis and teachers of the law would have undergone official training and got their necessary qualifications. Jesus didn’t have any of that – but had the authority of a close relationship with God his father. We had a discussion in our fellowship group over the merits of qualifications over experience. Most of the group would appoint someone to job on the basis of their experience rather than their qualifications. For many of our job seekers today particularly the young, getting qualifications is one thing, but being given the chance to gain experience is often more of a challenge.

The rabbis and teachers of the law would say ‘Moses says this, or it is written… Jesus would just say ‘I say unto you…. He spoke with authority.

He had power to achieve the tasks set before him. But that power was exercised in a compassionate humble way. So much power in our world is exercised in a self-seeking way – looking after number one, ensuring your bonus comes through, protect your vested interest. Jesus power was exercised for the benefit of others to bring haling and hope to a fallen world.

In the next two weeks we will notice how Mark in his gospel makes a distinction between those who are ill and those who are possessed, or have unclean spirits. The worldview of the time believed that evil spirits were the cause of all sickness and disease. I approached the passage from quite a liberal and rational perspective and suggested that in Jesus’ day, disorders such as autism, epilepsy, and mental illnesses were lumped into the general category of “demon possession” or “unclean spirits.” I also said that while some Christians struggle with the idea of supernatural powers of evil, there are others who believe in personalised evil as much as a personal God and who would not accept that demonization is merely mental ill-health.

I’ll be frank with you - I struggle with those who see demons under every bed. But I do not wish for one moment to deny that that some of the power struggles that Jesus had with unclean and evil spirits accord with some experiences today.

Most Christian ministers will have some stories to tell. I could tell you some stories. The nearest I’ve experienced to the story we looked at last week where a man possessed by an evil spirit shrieked at Jesus and Jesus rebuked him and cast the spirit out was when a friend of Debbie and myself got cursed by a village witchdoctor after a trip abroad. He came back seemingly depressed and withdrawn but as we prayed with him he became abusive. He hated the name of Jesus, even at one point being physically sick at the mention of the Lord’s name. His facial features started to change; he exhibited eating disorders over the course of the next couple of months– it was as if a battle was taking place within his body. We sought specialist help and also prayer ministry. As we prayed for him he started to become aggressive with superhuman strength that took four of us to restrain him. After hours of prayer, calling on the help of the Lord, whatever was afflicting our friend had been cast out. It was in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ that he was healed. Some, I’m sure would try and offer a rational explanation for what happened. But I know it was in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ that he was healed and that this had been a spiritual encounter. Stuff happens. I don’t want to be alarmist, but I believe there is a spiritual struggle. There are many unhealthy and unclean influences around in our society. The biblical writers described as demonic the spirits that are out to hurt us, destroy us, destroy human relationships, our relationship to God, our health and wellbeing. The biblical writers call us to discern the spirits – by their fruits you will know them.

The other week I was on my Masters course in Christian spirituality and we had a lecture on St Ignatius. Ignatius was born in 1491. He became a military commander and was injured in battle. Whilst he was laid up recovering he read courtly romances – the equivalent of hello magazine and the likes today. And then he started reading the bible. He noticed that whilst the courtly romances where distracting and superficially enjoyable he felt bored and dissatisfied by them. In contrast he started reading scripture and found he became energised and ennobled. He came to a deep faith and religious experience of God and went on to devise a method of spiritual exercises which he described as the discernment of spirits. His goal was to continue a close living relationship with God and that required what he called a daily examen. The examen was a reflection on the day and trying to discern what had drawn you closer to God and what had pulled you away. He called this the discernment of spirits. He recognised that there is more than one kingdom in the world and forces are at work pulling us away from living under the authority of King Jesus and his kingdom. The examen was about reflecting on what spiritual influences we have during the day.

We can be under the influence of ‘unclean’ spirits. The spirit of pride, or resentment. The spirit of envy and hatred. The spirit of cynicism or fear. These spirits can pull us away from God’s kingdom,

We need a spiritual clean up, scrub down. Don’t destroy us' they will shout. But they are not to be tolerated. Be silent – get out – there should be no collusion with spirits of r4esetnment, envy, hatred, fear.

Sometimes healing mean putting an arm around someone and offering comfort, a listening ear, love and understanding. Other forms of healing needs surgery – getting rid of the cancer, the unclean tumour.

Jesus was the healer, the great surgeon – come to deal with those forces of destruction to be a bridge to salvation.

The recent cruise ship disaster brought mind a story about the Zeebrugge ferry disaster a few decades ago. If you remember the doors of the car ferry failed to shut properly and water began to pour in and the boat bean to sink. All at once one man – not a member of the crew – took charge. In a clear voice he gave orders, telling people what to do. Relief mixed with the panic as people realised someone at least was in charge, and many managed to reach lifeboats they would otherwise have missed in the dark and the rush. The man himself made his way down to the people trapped in the hold. There he formed a human bridge: holding on with one hand to a ladder and with the other to part of the ship that was nearly submerged, he enabled still more to cross to safety. When the nightmare was over, the man himself was found to have drowned. He had literally given his life in using the authority he had assumed – the authority by which many had been saved.

Sometimes people for whom life had become a nightmare – whose personalities seemed to have been taken over by alien powers – confronted Jesus; indeed they seemed to have an inside track on recognising him, knowing who he was and what he’d come to do. He’d come to stop the nightmare, to rescue people, both nations and individuals from the destructive powers that enslaved them.so whether it was shrieking demons, a woman with a feverorsimplywhateverdiesease people happened to suffer from, Jesus dealt with them, with an effective but gentle authority. Jesus became like a Human Bridge over which many would find salvation and climb to safety. But in the process Jesus himself would give his own life as the price for this saving authority. It was just an example of his integrity. The demons would shriek at him as he hung on the cross, challenging and mocking for the last time his authority. On the cross he would complete the healing work begun that day in the synagogue of Marks’ account

When the church learns gain how to speak and act with the same gentle loving authority, we will find the saving power of God unleashed once more and a similar heightened opposition from the forces of darkness. Similar but not the same. The demons knew Jesus, and knew he had come to defeat them once and for all. They can still shriek and cause damage and destruction. But since Calvary they no longer have authority. To believe this is the key to Christian testimony and saving action in the world that, despite its frequent panic and despair, as already been claimed by the loving authority of Godin Jesus?

Put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Believe he is the Holy One of God, the name above all names, the one who speaks with authority; the one who has the power to heal the sick, cast out the demons and holds the keys to death and death’s domain.

. In his penetrating book The First Circle, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the famous Russian author who defected to America, makes an interesting observation about how the Russian authorities handle the church. He writes: "No one stops them from ringing their bells; they can break communion bread anyway they please. They can have their processions with the cross. But they will in no way allow them to have any connection with social or civic affairs." The church was allowed to go through the motions; it could have a presence, but it dare not have an influence.

What bothered the scribes was not that Jesus prayed and preached. It was the fact that his prayers and his sermons were moving the people to action. I wonder if the church still has that concept of authority. So often our problem is not that we do not have authority, it is that we do not use the authority that we have. It is time that we quit defining the problems of the world and start applying the power of the church to the problems.

We have been given authority by God, through Jesus Christ, to heal, to proclaim, to change, to bring redemption, and to expel. We are under an imperative from God and we need not fear either principalities or death for Christ has been given all authority over heaven and earth. Now we need to start applying that authority.

Now the ball is in our courts…

Loving God,
please clean up our spirits,
grant us to be agents of your healing,
agents of reconciliation,
agents of your shalom peace.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
**Amen.**

**Call to worship**

**One:** Jesus calls us.

 **All: We recognize the voice of our teacher.**

 **One:** Jesus calls with a renewed message.

**All: We are straining our ears for this good news.**

**One:** Jesus calls a new realm into being.

**All: We hear the call with hope and anticipation.**

 **One:** Jesus calls to a new way of life.

**All: We will answer the call, we will follow.**

**Opening prayer**

Praise God. We thank you, God, with all our heart. You have created an amazing world for us to live in and we are thankful. Your love is steadfast and true. Your intent is for all to be happy and whole. We witness your way of love in all creation, and are pleased to be invited to be part of it. We praise your holy name, as we seek to live out Wisdom’s teaching, in harmony with creation and breathing the breath of life.

**r of confession**

God, sometimes we live with troubled spirits. We are disturbed by grief or guilt, shame or restlessness. Sometimes we live with hurt spirits, in pain from physical or mental illness, relationship heartaches, betrayal, disappointment. Sometimes we live with faltering spirits, overcome with worry, fear, doubt, uncertainty. Sometimes we live with spirits that keep us isolated because we are misunderstood, or unable to communicate or interact. We bring our spirits to you, whatever they are like today, because you ask us to. Amen. *A moment of silence*

**Words of affirmation** When our spirits are troubled, God brings us peace. When our spirits are hurting, God is our source of healing. When our spirits falter, God gives us strength to carry on. When our spirits alienate us from others, God reconciles us to community. In God who is peace and healing, strength and reconciling love, we trust. Amen.

May God, who is love, hold you. May God, who is liberation, free you. May God, who is healing, restore you to wholeness. May we who have celebrated the gift of Christ’s teaching and healing today, go from this place to be a people that lives and teaches God’s reconciling love in the world. Amen.

**Prayers of the people**

**ne**: We pray with those who long for a message of hope:

**All: may we be the hopeful Body of Christ.**

**One**: We pray with those who long for a healing touch:

**All: may we be the healing Body of Christ.**

**One**: We pray with those who yearn for freedom:

 **All: may we be the liberating Body of Christ.**

**One**: We pray with those who seek a return to community:

**All: may we be the reconciling Body of Christ.**

 **One**: We pray with those who would like to know you more, O God.

**All: May we be the Body of Christ bearing witness to your loving presence in the world. Amen.**

**Prayer of dedication** Christ’s body we are. Christ’s body we seek to be – Christ’s body, Christ’s healing, Christ’s message of love to the world. We dedicate the money we have offered, and the offerings of ourselves, in service of Christ’s body, Christ’s healing, and Christ’s message of love to the world. Amen.