

SCRIPTURE READINGS: 1 Corinthians 8: 1-13 Mark 1: 21-28

SERMON

Many scholars think that Mark's Gospel was written somewhere between 60 and 65 AD. They think that the main audience is the Jewish Christian community, not in Judea, but perhaps in Rome. If these scholarly theories are true, then the story about Jesus' authority takes on a special kind of power and importance. If the date of writing is correct, then Mark's Gospel coincides with the first major Roman persecution of Christians in Rome. Nero, the Emperor, singled out the Christians in Rome for serious persecution. This began a trend that ultimately resulted in the Empire-wide persecution during the reign of Diocletian.

In the story, Jesus demonstrates authority in teaching the Scriptures. His authority is visible, audible, and amazes those who heard him. Jesus also demonstrates authority over the demonic. And, amazingly, the demon recognized Jesus as the anointed one who was coming into the world bringing the Kingdom of God. He asked Jesus, "are you coming to kill me?"

Imagine, if you can, that you were a Christian in Rome in 63 AD. You have a Jewish heritage. You are already part of the Diaspora – that is - Jews living away from Israel. You are uncertain about your religious identity. You no longer go to the Temple in Jerusalem. You believe in Jesus. But you don't know whether this means that you are primarily a Jew or whether this means that you are something else. To complicate the situation, Nero has begun to persecute Christians.

In short, the question of religious authority, authority in teaching Scripture, is immediate and personal. At the same time the demonic is immediate and personal. The Roman authorities might at any time come and get you. You could be executed in some terrible way - possibly fed to the lions.

Imagine hearing this text from the Mark's Gospel. Two of your serious anxieties are plainly faced. Jesus is the one with the authority to face them and overcome them.

Many scholars think that Jesus claimed his authority with Scripture by teaching its meaning directly. In the typical rabbinical way of teaching, the teacher would discuss all of the commentaries on a text. The discussion would be something like, "Rabbi Gamaliel said...and Rabbi Moses says...but Rabbi Simon says...."

Finally the teacher would conclude with his own viewpoint. Jesus didn't do that. He said, "Today this text is fulfilled in your presence." He taught with personal authority. He did not rely on the authority of the teaching tradition.

In confronting the demonic, Jesus exercised his authority to heal. The demon saw Jesus for who he was and responded with fear. Jesus' authority over the demonic was powerfully demonstrated.

The two displays of authority would have been a source of strength to the Jewish Christian in Rome in 63 AD. What do they mean in our time?

A priest tells this story: Once he was spiritual director for a Cursillo. (Cur-SEE-Yo is a short weekend course in basic Christianity). One of the candidates was a young woman who was getting a Ph.D. at a university. At a quiet point in the Cursillo weekend she asked if she might receive some spiritual guidance. The priest, of course, agreed. The woman's story was one of great achievements. She told about academic, athletic, and artistic success, and still she felt empty. She said it was as if she were trying to fill a hole in her life because she felt so empty. She felt she had been paying the world to make her a success. She had worked hard to have all of her successes,

but they had not made her feel better about herself. Now, finding herself in a course that teaches that what she was seeking was free for the asking, she was amazed.

The priest shared with her his own story of attempting to cure himself from his personal broken life. While different, it had similar themes. He told her how he had learned to accept Jesus as his only hope for life and joy in living. He told her how he thought he was going crazy, then realised in fact he was going sane! The young woman said that was what she wanted. The priest guided her through the process of claiming Jesus as her Lord and Saviour. Afterward she said, "Only Jesus has the authority to give meaning to life and to heal the broken".

The Gospel is always good news. But before we are in it, we don't see it as good. To find meaning in life, to experience healing of that which is broken, we have to submit to his authority. But it is not in our nature to do that. We are rebellious. But when God gives us the gift of submission, we enter the meaning and joy that comes through Jesus.