

BIBLE READINGS: 1 Corinthians 9:16-23 Mark 1:29-39

SERMON

In this passage, we read of Jesus' first public appearance reported by Mark.

In the first 20 verses the scene is set for this public appearance. A messenger appears - John the Baptist; Jesus is baptized and directed into the desert where he is tempted by the Evil One; 4 fishermen hear Jesus' call and follow him, leaving at once their previous jobs and lives to follow this man. All this sets the scene.

The movement of Jesus and his disciples into (21) and out of (29) the synagogue is full of energy - Jesus strides in - commandingly. He teaches the people. How amazed they are! He teaches with authority - unlike the usual teaching offered by the local scribes and rabbis. Suddenly his teaching is interrupted by a man possessed by an evil spirit. This Spirit abuses Jesus and attempts to control him. Jesus in a few words silences the spirit and forces it from the man.

The people are amazed and wonder at Jesus' authority.

We are not informed about what Jesus taught at Capernaum. Whatever it was he said, it amazed the congregation - for he spoke with confidence and didn't follow the standard rabbinical practice of repeating the traditional formulae and interpretations of the law. He taught as if he knew directly what he was talking about.

In the middle of it all we have the man with an evil spirit attempting to break in on Jesus' teaching. Yet this too is seen as a part of Jesus teaching because he has authority over the evil spirit. The evil spirit in naming Jesus tries to control him, but it can't, and Jesus again shows his authority because he uses no formulae or ritual to banish the evil spirit - his word is all that is required.

The people are amazed - they understand the teaching is about authority - Jesus' authority. Mark, in the following chapters, reinforces this picture. In fact in Mark 2, we read the story of the paralysed man - Jesus again shows and proves his authority.

That Mark should report as Jesus' first public miracle the casting out of the demon makes sense for another reason. He wants us to see that Jesus is at war with the Evil One and that the battle is over the issue of Jesus' authority in this world. The forces of light and dark are drawn up right from the start.

According to the text, the people broke out in debate, arguing and shouting, trying to be heard over each other - "what's going on?" they wondered; "Who is this man?"; "Look what he has done!".

Yet for all their debate the response is pretty flat. The evil spirit names Jesus, the Holy One of God - a name that places Jesus at least equal with Elijah. They were amazed by Jesus' authority, but they did not respond to it. They did not leave with him as his disciples.

Why? My theory is that the evil spirit spoke for the congregation. The Spirit's language is ambiguous when it says "What do you want with us?". This could mean that there were several spirits in the possessed man or the spirit was speaking for the congregation.

When Jesus started to exert his authority in the synagogue he challenged the spiritual and earthly powers who were in control. It is little wonder that the Scribes and Pharisees plotted his death, and that the demons cried out in anger.

The awesome news for us today is that Jesus has given us authority to represent him to the world. We may not be called on to preach, or drive out demons, our calling may be to witness to his authority in how we conduct our lives, lives freed from bandage and gladly submitted to the authority of Jesus Christ our Lord and saviour.

Jesus' authority came from who he was - the Holy One - the Son of God. Even his name has power and authority. Calling on his name releases the powers of heaven.

Yet as it was in the synagogue, so it is today. Just as the spirit mocked Jesus because of his home town, so we will be mocked when we speak up for Jesus. It is not an easy thing to do - but its not something to worry about either - Jesus promised us help and proof of authority - he promised us this Spirit.

I remember as a young Christian helping to run a camp. The teenagers did not come from church backgrounds. In fact of the 50 teenagers, only one was a Christian. It was a great camp - but towards its end, the speaker, John Mavor, told us leaders he would challenge the young people to offer their lives to Jesus.

These kids had had to be frisked before they came to the campsite - knives, chains, cigarettes, marijuana, alcohol, pornography, it was all there. As a leader, I urged him to reconsider - I knew these young people. I told John that we would have a better chance of converting lions into lambs. He smiled and said that he would not be converting anyone. He said that the Holy Spirit would challenge the young people. He declared that as the young people came under the challenge of God's Spirit that they would recognise Jesus' authority over their lives. That night 49 young people made decisions for Christ!

We are witnesses to Jesus power and authority - it is our task to let others know about Him. But remember it's not our responsibility to change others, it's not our power at work. It is the Spirit who will guide us, empower us and work in the hearts of those we meet to convince them of Jesus' authority. We don't have to go knocking on people's doors or their heads every moment of our spare time. God will lead us and lead people to us. Our responsibility is to be ready to witness to Jesus' authority in our lives.

Submit yourself to Jesus, seek his guidance, and allow him to direct your thought and actions, and the Spirit will present opportunities to share with others about Jesus' Lordship in your life.