**Mark 1:21-28**

**Jesus Christ – a healer with authority**

We are concluding our short series of sermons on the person of Jesus Christ. Throughout this Epiphany season we have been thinking about who this Jesus is that we follow as Christians. We have thought about Jesus as a child to be adored, a God to be worshipped, a Saviour to be followed, a Lord to be obeyed…and today, we are thinking about Jesus as a healer with authority, to be trusted.

And we are considering this fascinating passage from Mark 1, which you can follow on page 37 in the second half of the pew Bibles.

It’s a story that is set in Capernaum, the hometown of Peter, and Jesus has gone into the synagogue and was teaching there. And in verse 22 we read this statement from Mark: “The people were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, not as the scribes.” This is a curious statement for Mark to make because surely the teachers of the law had the ultimate spiritual authority. They had been the spiritual leaders in that community for years, they had deep learning, they were revered for their knowledge, they were, in many respects, the brokers of truth. Isn’t that what authority is all about? How could Mark say, then, that Jesus taught as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law?

In its essence, authority is the right someone has or a right that an institution holds to enforce or expect obedience from others. Certainly the teachers of the law had that type of authority: they had legal qualifications, they had the right to judge people, and so people would indeed obey the teachers of the law.

But I believe there are two types of authority, and those who are in spiritual leadership must be absolutely clear about this. There is Positional Authority and there is Relational Authority.

Positional Authority is where someone expects people to respect him or her because of the position they hold. Some people demand or expect respect to be given to them because of their title or the role they have played in the church.

Sometimes this is made explicit: “I am the Vicar and, as spiritual leader of this community, I expect you to do what I say…” But more often than not, Positional Authority is expressed in passive-aggressive behaviour. Those who rely on Positional Authority speak and act in ways that make others feel inferior to them in terms of knowledge or experience or wisdom. Reliance on Positional Authority may draw on a passive-aggressive way of being that suggests the title someone has is enough in itself: people should listen and obey…

But Positional Authority can be a dangerous and ungodly thing. It can be contrary to the example of Christ who, we read in Philippians 2, “being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.” The example of Jesus Christ is the exact opposite of Positional Authority. It is the absolute denunciation of Positional Authority. He did not cling to his own Positional Authority but became a servant instead…

Instead, Jesus acted out of Relational Authority

Relational Authority is exhibited by leaders who seek to win respect, who seek to be transparent with those they lead, transparent about their mission and vision, transparent about their own failings and shortcomings, and seek to minister out of a respect that has been earned. As Paul says of Jesus in Philippians 2: “[He] made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being found in human likeness…he humbled himself…”

Now that is not to say that leaders who operate out of Relational Authority are not strong leaders: the very opposite is often true! Relational Authority can only happen when a leader is clear and focussed. But in the clarity and the strength and the vision, there must always be a deeply human and humble approach.

And it is because of the humanity of the Relational approach that authority is clearly exercised. Most of us are more attracted to following Relational leaders than Positional leaders because we recognise in them a deep humanity - and they allow us to be human too.

And so, when Mark says, “[Jesus] taught them as one who having authority”, that is a reflection on his Relational Authority; that he was humble and deeply human and was allowing people to meet him in their humanity too. And because they had become so used to people leading out of Positional Authority, we read in verse 22 that the people were “astounded at his teaching”. This notion of amazement is a strong word: it almost has the connotation of putting people into shock or even panic, such was the strength and power of his Relational Authority. The like of this had not been seen before!

And so we are not surprised that even the evil spirits went into panic and shock! Verse 23: “Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?’ Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.’”

What is interesting here, of course, is that even an evil spirit knew who Jesus was but the religious teachers of the law had not worked it out for themselves! How ironic that the holy men should have missed the truth in their midst, and yet the unclean should recognise Jesus for who he was.

And the unclean spirit confesses a deep knowledge of Jesus. First, he says, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” and by saying that, he recognised the authority that resided in the humanity of Christ, raised in Nazareth. Second, he says, “I know who you are, the Holy One of God” and by that he is recognising the divinity of Christ.

But even though the unclean spirit knew who Jesus was, it refused to submit to his authority. And, of course, the call on us as Christians is not just to know who Jesus is but to submit our lives to his authority and power. Not just Jesus of Nazareth. Not just the Holy One of God. But Jesus our Lord.

And it is because the evil spirit would not sit under the Lordship of Christ that Jesus commands him to be quiet, verse 25: “But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent…’”

Jesus is not interested in academic acknowledgement of who he is.

Jesus doesn’t want us to speak about him purely from our knowledge.

Jesus wants us to speak out about him from a position of us accepting his Lordship.

It is easy to get caught up in academic debates about God - whether he created the world in six days or through evolution, whether Christianity is the only way to heaven or all religions are equal, whether Jesus was fully God or just a good man - and there is a time and a place for all of these questions…But the ultimate question is whether or not we are prepared to sit under his Lordship and give our lives over to him as disciples…

An intellectual belief in Jesus is worthless. The issue is how much authority Jesus has in your life.

For those of you who like grammar, Martin Luther, the great 16th-century Reformer said that, “The life of Christianity consists of possessive pronouns”. We can say Christ is the Saviour. We can say that Christ is Lord. We can say that Jesus is God. But can I say that Christ is *my* Saviour? Can I say that Christ is *my* Lord? Can I say that Jesus is *my* God?

And so, to prove his authority, Jesus heals the man and drives out the unclean spirit. By this exorcism, he proved his authority over Satan and the uncleanness of this world.

And Mark concludes this passage by saying: “At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee”. The Gospel – the Good News – of Jesus Christ began to spread because of word and deed.

And so it is with us as a church here in Enfield, that the Good News of Jesus will spread throughout our community as we engage in mission through word and deed. Our Mission Action Plan is not a paper exercise. We want to engage in the Five Marks of Mission that are on the pewsheet. We want to measure all that we say and do against those Five Marks and be absolutely focussed on the Mission Life of St. Andrew’s Church. Our Mission Action Plan is a living document, not something that we have read once and filed away. We want Christ to be known through this community and commit ourselves as a church to this vision.

This passage from Mark confirms the truth that Jesus Christ has authority over us. It is not a Positional Authority but a Relational Authority.

This passage confirms for us that intellectual knowledge about Christ is not enough. Instead, we need to submit to him as Lord.

This passage confirms for us that the fame of Christ will spread through Enfield as we engage in both word and deed.

We must be a church committed to Christ’s mission in this community. Who is this Jesus we follow? He is a child to be adored, a God to be worshipped, a Saviour to be followed, a Lord to be obeyed, a Healer to be trusted

And so, as we draw this Epiphany season to a close, we re-commit ourselves to Jesus Christ and ask that, this coming year the Good News will be spread throughout the community through his mission, which we engage in here at St. Andrew’s.

Amen