

Sunday 01 February 2009

The Authority of Jesus
A reflection on the Gospel and NT readings for the day
[Indebted to input from Nathan Nettleton]

1 Corinthians 8: 1-13

Mark 1: 21 - 28

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Pre-sermon Intro, from AWAD "Thought for the day"...

In the Gospel reading today, we heard about authority, and in the NT reading, there was reference to people being "puffed up", and there are enough of those around in every sphere of life. And from a brief daily email on Friday I came across this quotation, which addressed that issue so it seemed good to share it with you before getting into the sermon:

*No matter that we may mount on stilts, we still must walk on our own legs. And on the highest throne in the world, we still sit only on our own bottom. ☺*

*Michel de Montaigne, essayist (1533-1592)*

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In public and private conversations, people sometimes make the comment that "there has been a breakdown of authority". It expresses the concern that that people no longer believe all the things that they used to believe and no longer respect the authorities that were once considered unquestionable.

So we might ask, "what is authority anyway?" Why should "authorities" be trusted and obeyed in the first place? What gives someone authority?

It is sobering to remind ourselves that, during the Nuremberg Trials that followed World War Two, many soldiers used the defense that they were "only following orders given by the authorities". Nevertheless, they were found guilty on the grounds that an authority should not be obeyed when the orders given are evil. In our own country's history, we've dealt with some similar stuff. Along with many, I would say that any good moral code should teach that you don't obey someone simply for the reason that they have a position of authority... you have to question whether what they are ordering you to do is right or not.

Our readings set in the Lectionary for today speak to this matter of authority and give us some good examples of different ways of understanding it.

An intriguing point about Mark's gospel is that he frequently tells us that Jesus was teaching and that the people were amazed at his teaching and said that he spoke "as one with authority", yet Mark tells us very little of what Jesus actually said. There may be a clue in this passage. The people are amazed at his teaching... then he sets a man free from the grip of evil, and the people are even MORE amazed at his teaching.

That suggests that what we are seeing here, and elsewhere in Mark's gospel, is "enacted teaching". What Jesus does, flows directly from what he's been saying, and when the people see it happening in practice, they recognise it as more than mere words but as teaching "with authority".

First the people are astounded because Jesus "taught them as one having authority." This suggests that Jesus' style of teaching seemed more authoritative than what the people were used to, regardless of what he might be saying.

The most common style of the rabbis in Jesus day was to teach by continual reference back to earlier authorities. In other words authority was "derived".

In much the same way that we might back up our argument by saying, "As Jesus said..." or "As C.S. Lewis said..." so the rabbis would teach by assembling and presenting the teachings of authoritative teachers who had gone before them. But the impression we gain from the gospels is that Jesus didn't do that. Instead he taught as though the truth of what he said was self-evident. He taught "as one having authority" rather than as one who needed to appeal to an external authority.

The second point in the story where the issue of authority comes up is after Jesus has healed the man. This time it is the teaching itself that is described as having authority. When Jesus speaks, things happen. There is authority in what he says. Jesus speaks to the people, and his message is one of freedom from the oppression of evil, and then when the people see that this is not just words but is something that has immediate impact in their midst, they identify it as a teaching with authority.

It is notable that the whole focus on Jesus' authority is related to what he says and does, not to a badge of office. There is no suggestion that Jesus has authority because he is a properly ordained rabbi; people do not listen to him because he has been vested with authority – they declare him to have authority because they have listened to him and found what he said to be authoritative. His authority is earned.

Once the people have concluded that he has authority, no doubt they would be even more willing to take note of what he says, but the initial conclusion regarding his authority is that it is earned, not assumed. And it is earned by the fact that his message is a message of freedom and hope, backed up by people actually being set free at his word and touch.

For a contrasting model of authority, let's have a look at the reading from Paul's letter to the church at Corinth. Paul is concerned here about the misuse of authority, or more specifically the immature handling of knowledge and teaching. He asserts the priority of love over knowledge: "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." Truth handled without concern for the rule of love can be hurtful and destructive, the very opposite of what we saw in Jesus.

Paul is pointing out that just because something is true doesn't mean that it will be freeing and up-building for everyone. In the hands of those who lack wisdom, maturity and compassion, truth can be wielded arrogantly and oppressively. While it is still true that the truth will set you free, truth can be misused to cause fear and doubt and to dis-empower people. Paul is absolutely clear in his opinion: being right comes a distant second to being loving.

So we've got some interesting contrasting images of authority in these passages. Two of the most frequently used models of authority are discredited somewhat. We see Jesus moving away from authority based simply on established office - I'm the rabbi, therefore listen - or on appeal to established tradition - I'm quoting the experts, therefore listen. We see Paul criticising the claim made for authority that is based upon the ability to prove oneself right - I can win the argument, therefore listen.

The model of authority that stands up to the scrutiny of these passages is that which is earned by the wise and compassionate sharing of knowledge and power that brings hope, healing and freedom from all that would oppress and harm people.

To conclude >>>

Conclusion:

These are some reflections from today's readings, and I will basically leave it there, and encourage you to reflect on them. We can surely all think of people in positions of authority who have acted in ways that failed to bring hope, wholeness and freedom to those over whom they exercised authority. We can quickly think of people in the public sphere – and especially in the political world – who have authority in name and law but seem not to exercise it on behalf of the common good! But that can be too easy, in the usual manner of pointing fingers at others.

For in addition to that line of thought, I found myself thinking about how I view and apply authority: how I relate to the authority of Jesus, for example; and how I wield authority in various spheres, including in my home with my children, in personal relationships and in the community.

It also struck me that many in our community have authority over others and amongst others, through their leadership roles or managerial roles in offices and industrial places, and amongst children as parents and within schools, for instance.

We can also surely all think of examples where someone - perhaps without any official position - showed themselves to have a genuine Christ-like authority by the way their words and actions set others free or built them up?

Though it can be sobering to think through such things, I certainly know what model of authority I would prefer to serve under, and what model I would prefer to live by inasmuch as I have any authority or influence over others. Which model or style do you prefer? And which model do you live by?