

Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany and 191st Annual Meeting of Grace Church
A Service of Holy Communion with Baptism

28 January 2018

Mark 1:21-28

In the Gospel of Mark the early ministry of Jesus happens rather quickly: we move from John the Baptist, to Jesus' Baptism, to the temptation, to the selection of first disciples, to the beginning of his ministry in Galilee, to the episode of today's Gospel: the teaching in Capernaum and the healing of the unclean spirit. And we are still in the first chapter, and only on verse 21.

Our passage mentions that Jesus was traveling with his disciples, but it does not tell us much about these people. *Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.* We know of the calling of the first four Apostles (Simon, Andrew, James and John), but so far in Mark we haven't heard anything about the rest of the apostles or any of the disciples. I often wonder who these people were and why they were so attracted to Jesus of Nazareth. What was it about him that was so compelling these folks followed him whatever he went? What did they see in him? The passage also does not tell us about what his teaching in Capernaum was about. It is almost as though for Mark the fact that Jesus is on the move is more important than his actual teaching. We do know that in Galilee he taught about repentance and the Kingdom of God being near. Perhaps this is what he is teaching about in Capernaum. Whatever he was teaching, this was a different type of teaching for his listeners. They had never heard such teaching. This was new, fresh, powerful.

The passage today gives us a clue as to why the "Disciples" were following Jesus. It tells us that after Jesus' teaching, his listeners *"were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."* His teaching had authority! I find this very interesting. What is Mark trying to tell us? Didn't the Scribes teach with authority? They who were the teachers of the law, the interpreters of Jewish sages, the lawyers of the day. Didn't they also have authority? What was so different about Jesus's teaching that made the Scribes' teachings pale by comparison?

Jesus' authority is different to the Scribal authority. The Scribes for the most part translate and interpret the Law of Israel (Torah). Their job is to interpret for the people what is written by the authors of the Torah, and by the commentaries on the Law written by famous Rabbis. Their job is not to make the law, but to interpret it. Their job is not to speak on their own behalf or to impart their own knowledge, but rather to help the people understand and obey the teachings of others (Moses, ancient Rabbi's, etc.) Their authority comes from faithfulness to the text and the teachings of the person they are teaching

about. Like a history professor who is an expert on Lincoln, for example. His authority comes from his ability to speak accurately about the president, his life, his accomplishments, his thinking and his legacy. If the historian's teachings are filled with inaccuracies, his authority as an expert can be questioned.

Jesus' authority is different. He is not the interpreter of famous Rabbis and he does not claim this as his role. We know he is a great interpreter of Scripture, but this is not his primary role. His teaching is new. He is speaking of a new kingdom, a new world order ruled by God's mercy and grace, and a new way for people to experience God's presence in their lives. He is more concerned with people finding their way to God than he is about blind obedience to rules, statutes, regulations, and celebrations. He speaks of the Sabbath being for man rather than man being for the Sabbath. He speaks of God as being near. He proclaims God's willingness to forgive humanity. It is this knowledge of God's infinite love for humanity that led Jesus to teach in Galilee that, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (V.15). Jesus' teaching are not about oppressive rules that must be obeyed, but rather about "Good News". His teachings are about freedom, love, forgiveness, service, and transformation. His authority comes from the fact that his teachings are his and not an interpretation of anybody else's teachings. He is here to speak on behalf of God himself. Jesus is both the teacher and the content of the teaching. His authority rests as much on his skills as a preacher as they rest on the fact that he is the Son of God. Jesus is speaking about himself. This is where his authority comes from.

Now, as if to prove his point, Jesus engages in a conversation with a most unlikely of characters. The text tells us that a man with an unclean spirit 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.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him." I find it very interesting that the first voice in the Gospel of Mark that acknowledges that Jesus is the "Holy One of God" is an evil spirit. The great irony is that while evil spirits are willing to acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah, the teachers of the law and many others will refuse to acknowledge Jesus as such.

Right after the expulsion of the evil spirit, Mark tells us that "They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching-- with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.'" For the second time in this short passage we hear the words "Amazed (astounded)" and "authority". The crowds kept asking each other about who this Jesus was and what this new teaching was about. They were shaken to their foundations, moved to the core. They had come face to face with the divine power of the Messiah and their lives would never be the same. Many of them knew in their hearts that only the Messiah could do the things this man had just

done. Many knew that only this man had the power to save and to liberate. Even the evil forces of this world had no power to resist this Jesus of Nazareth. Only he could give health and restoration to the possessed man. Only he could utter a word of healing that could restore the man's full humanity. They were so moved by this Jesus that they "began to spread stories about Jesus throughout the surrounding region of Galilee."

My friends, we are here today because at some point in our lives we too came face to face with the power and the authority of Jesus of Nazareth. We too have come to understand that only this Jesus has the power and the authority we need. Only this Jesus can speak a powerful word of forgiveness into our lives, a powerful word that can liberate us from our bonds and can restore us to health. Only Jesus can speak with authority about our human condition and only he can redeem our broken humanity. We gather here today for the same reason those who came before us gathered here 191 years ago. They were convinced that Jesus was Good News for them, for their families, and for their community. Many of them came to Jesus through personal trials and pain. Many of them came to Jesus as children of Christian parents. Many of them were brought into the faith through marriage or relocation to the area. But, regardless of how they came to know Jesus, they gathered here week after week to offer their lives to God and to ask for his protection and his provision, to pray and to read Holy Scripture together, and to be reminded of God's infinite love for them and their families. They gathered not because they had no place else to go, but because there was no place they would rather be. On these pews they gathered to dream, to mourn, to pray, and to celebrate. Not because they believed Jesus was a nice guy, but because they knew Jesus was the Redeemer of the world. They knew that no one could love them and understand them as he could. They knew Jesus of Nazareth was and is Good News!

We too are here today because Jesus is Good News for our lives, in the same way he has been Good News for Grace Church for 191 years. In a world filled with righteous moralism, Jesus speaks a word of acceptance and love into our lives. In a world filled with despair, Jesus speaks a word of hope into our lives. In a world overrun by materialism, Jesus speaks a word of compassion into our lives. We are here not because Jesus is a better way, but because he is the only way. Today, as we welcome James into the household of God and as we give thanks to God for 191 years of blessings, we ask God's protection and provision for our church and for our families for many years to come. We ask that God may continue to bless our ministries and our life together that we may continue to grow in our knowledge and love of God and of his Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, the Good News of our Salvation.

Now, to end this sermon, join me in reading a Litany of Thanksgiving found as an insert in your bulletin (Read Litany adapted from BCP 838).

A Litany of Thanksgiving (Adapted from BCP 838)

Annual Meeting 2018

Fr. Roldan: We thank you, Lord, for all your servants and witnesses in times past

Reader: For Abraham, the father of believers and Sarah his wife;

People: ***We thank you, Lord.***

Reader: For Moses, Aaron, Miriam and Joshua, Deborah and Gideon, and Samuel with Hannah his mother;

People: ***We thank you, Lord.***

Reader: For Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and all the prophets;

People: ***We thank you, Lord.***

Reader: For Mary, the mother of our Lord;

People: ***We thank you, Lord.***

Reader: For Peter, Paul, all the apostles, Mary and Martha, and Mary Magdalene;

People: ***We thank you, Lord.***

Reader: For Stephen, the first martyr, and all the martyrs and saints

People: ***We thank you, Lord.***

Reader: For the Reverend Robert Bowman, the founder of Grace Church and all the Rectors who have led Grace Church in faithful witness to Christ:

N. W. Monrow, Spencer Wall, Roderick Ranney, Daniel Smith Lewis, Richard Johnson, Marmaduke Dillon, Alexander Bakewell, E. W. Hunter, A. Kinney Hall, William Kirkland Douglas, Louis Tucker, Randolph Royall Claiborne, Alvin W. Skardon, John Calvin Goodman, Roberts Poinsett Johnson, Frank W. Levy, Robert Martin, David S. Crumley, Robert Godard Donaldson, John Arthur Klein, James E. Savoy, John Senette, Craig Poser, Charles Mencer, Kenned Dimmick, Stephen Holmgren, and Roman D. Roldan

People: ***We thank you, Lord.***

Reader: For the ministry of all Associate Rectors of Grace Church,

People: ***We thank you, Lord***

Reader: For all the ministries of Grace Church: Our Vestry, Finance, and Mission and Outreach Committee, for our ECW, Music Ministries, Altar Guild, Angola Prison, Preschool and Children Programs. For our Youth Group, Hospitality, Nursing Home, Centering Prayer Group, Angel Tree, Adult Formation Committee, Church Mice, Children and Preschool Chapel, Food Bank Volunteers, and all other ministries our members are involved in.

People: ***We thank you, Lord.***

Reader: For all the members of this congregation who have died since its founding, especially for those who have died in 2017.

People: ***We thank you, Lord.***

Fr. Roldan:

In your mercy, O Lord our God, give us the hope of salvation and the promise of eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord, the first-born of many from the dead, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. ***Amen.***