

Making an Impression

Mark 1: 21-28

A few years ago, as I was driving our children to school, we got stuck in traffic along the A47. We lived in Stamford at the time, and the children went to school in Peterborough. As the traffic moved slowly, we could see what the problem was. On this short stretch of dual carriageway, a car had not only broken down and stopped, but it was on fire. And all the cars behind – us included – were having to pass this burning car very slowly. In the need to get to work or school on time, people seemed to be ignoring the obvious risk to their safety, even as the flames grew higher as the fire took hold. Being the natural activist that I am, I swung into action, much to the embarrassment of my two teenagers. I stopped the car, got out, and started re-directing the traffic. There was a way around the blockage, if people turned around and took a right at the roundabout we'd just come through and drove through a small village. It was only a 5 min detour. However. Not everyone was interested in what I had to say. You see, I wasn't anybody in authority. I wasn't wearing a high-vis jacket. I wasn't the police or the fire service, and several drove around me to continue on the road, oblivious, it seemed, to the obvious risk.

Our story from Mark's gospel this morning is a similar story about authority. I'd like you for a moment to imagine that you were there in the synagogue that morning. You arrive expecting to listen to one of the usual scribes, but today, there's someone different. You haven't seen or heard him before, but he gets the nod from the ruler of the synagogue and starts to speak. Who is this, you wonder? He isn't speaking like one of the usual scribes whose task it is to extract from the Torah rules and regulations for every possible situation in life, and then teach them to the people. He doesn't start every pronouncement with, *'There is a teaching that...'* quoting the great legal masters of the past. This man has his own authority. He speaks clearly, with an inner confidence, as if he needed no authority beyond himself. He speaks with utter independence, and doesn't cite authorities or quote experts. It seems *he* is the expert, and the people gathered sit amazed, astounded at this new teaching which has such authority. It's as if he's hearing direct from God.

And then, just as he picks up speed, a man bursts in, speaking complete nonsense. He must be one of those possessed by a demon, whatever one of those is. You look to the ruler to kick him out – no-one can hear whilst all this shouting is going on. But why isn't he doing something? The ruler seems to be

looking at Jesus, waiting for his response. The demon controlling the man appears to recognise this new preacher. He shouts out both his earthly name, *'Jesus of Nazareth'*, but also a divine name, the *'Holy One of God'*. *'Have you come to destroy us,'* he demands.

And what does Jesus do? He tells the demon to shut up. *'Be quiet!'* he says sternly. *'Come out of him!'* And with these simple words of clear, brief authority, the man starts to writhe on the floor, kicking and twisting this way and the other, shouting all the while, until at last he is calm and free. The people sit there completely dazed. This sort of thing doesn't usually happen at the synagogue. People start to question what has just taken place. *'What is this?'* you hear people asking. *'A new teaching – and with authority. He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.'* If Jesus' words had amazed the people in the synagogue that day, his *deeds or actions*, left them speechless. They'd never before heard or seen anyone teach in this way. With such authority.

But what is authority? It is said that there are two types of authority. There is *positional authority* and there is *relational authority*. Let me explain.

Positional authority is where someone commands respect because of the position they hold. Simply put *'you need to listen to me because of who I am.'* People with positional authority have traditionally included judges, doctors, very senior officers in the forces, vicars, teachers, certainly head teachers. It's what was missing when I tried to direct the traffic that school morning.

In my early days of thinking about ordained ministry, I read a funny story in a book by John Pritchard, *'Life and Work of a Priest'*. It illustrates well a parishioner's take on positional authority. *'A vicar was called to see a man who was very ill. The man's wife took the vicar upstairs and they found the sick man with his eyes closed. The vicar took his wrist and felt for the pulse. "I'm afraid he's gone," he said to the wife solemnly. "No, I ain't," said the man indignantly. "Hush dear," said his wife, "vicar knows best."*

But whilst in today's passage, Jesus does use his positional authority as the *Holy One of God* in his dealing with the demon, this isn't the way he generally relates to people. We read in Philippians 2, *'being in very nature God, he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.'* In the vast majority of Jesus' ministry, he acted out of what's called *'relational authority'*. Put simply, *'listen to me because I do what I say.'* His authority came from his life and his

integrity, how he related to people. Think of how he related to the woman caught in adultery, the Samaritan Woman at the well, or Nicodemus up the tree. His actions gave power to his words. It's what President Joe Biden meant in his inauguration speech when he said *'we'll lead not merely by the example of our power, but the power of our example.'*

But, what of us today? What can this passage say to us in 21st Century Cottenham and Rampton? I think it can challenge us in three ways.

Firstly, it's common for people to comment to the vicar on the door as they leave church, *'Nice service ... nice sermon ... thank you.'* It's always nice when people say that, so please, don't stop when we're back! But, on the whole, we don't expect services to be disrupted, or interrupted. However, if you read about the occasions when Jesus attends a synagogue or the temple, something unexpected almost inevitably happens. It is said that Jesus *disturbs the comfortable, and comforts the disturbed*. It might be worth pondering, in the light of this reading, whether we are too comfortable in church, whether in the building or online? Do we sufficiently allow God's word to *challenge* and *excite* us? To give us hope? Do we allow the words and deeds of Jesus to provoke us to action or change?

Secondly, the unclean spirit confesses a deep knowledge of Jesus. First, he says, *'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth?'* and secondly, *'I know who you are, the Holy One of God'*. The unclean spirit knew who Jesus was but 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 – to live as he would want us to.

And thirdly, Mark concludes this passage by saying: *'News about Jesus spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee'*. If you'd been there that morning, you would have told everyone you knew about what had just happened and the chances were that, the next time Jesus was in town, many more would have been there.

So, a little takeaway from our reading this morning. Three questions to think about this week. You might want to write them down on a post-it and put them where you'll see them.

Number 1: in your reading of the Bible this week, think about whether what you're reading is asking you to do anything – is it provoking you to action or change?

Number 2: are you living as Jesus would want you to, or are there changes you need to make? A good question as Lent approaches.

And number 3: if we want the Good News of Jesus to spread through our community, it has to begin with us. What opportunities will you have this week to speak, or be, good news to someone else? And will you take them?

Let's pray:

Almighty God, be with us through this next week.

Meet with us each morning,
and in every situation throughout the day,
whoever we are with.

Help us to draw on your strength and wisdom,
that we may be faithful and true
in following the example and pattern
given to us by Jesus.

Amen.