

Colossians 2 ⁶ So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

⁹ For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ¹⁰ and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority. ¹¹ In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self, ruled by the flesh, was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

¹³ When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴ having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Mark 1: ²¹ They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach.

²² The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.

²³ Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, ²⁴ "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are--the Holy One of God!"

²⁵ "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!"

²⁶ The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

²⁷ The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching--and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him."²⁸ News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

In these challenging Covid times, we get anxious when the government chops and changes its policy and we're worried that they don't entirely know they are doing. We desperately need those who clearly have the knowledge and understanding of not only Covid or how vaccines work or how the infection spreads, but who also have a clear understanding of *us* as human beings, our day-to-day challenges and our worries and fears. We desperately need someone to speak to us with authority.

In our gospel reading today, Mark tells us: *The people were amazed at Jesus' teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority,*

"authority" - "ex-ousia" means "out of being".

Jesus spoke *out of his own being* – out of who he was – “not as the teachers of the law” i.e. the religious teachers – the scribes and the Pharisees – the so-called experts – who actually spoke quoting and comparing what other scholars and written over the years rather than from any first-hand knowledge. And so often, they failed to see the wood for the trees or as Jesus put it, they strained at gnats and swallowed camels. In other words they got upset about people not observing the minutiae of not only the law but all their own additional regulations and yet seemed unconcerned by the much bigger more important things like loving your neighbour. He also said in *Luke 11:46*: "And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them."

The people recognised that Jesus spoke the truth and that it came from his heart – and indeed from the heart of God. Not only this but he spoke to their hearts, because he understood them.

Often when a famous person dies, there is a TV programme which gives a kind of retrospective on that person's life, or you may listen to the Radio 4 programme: 'Great lives'. Not surprisingly, these programmes will rely a lot on interviews with people who knew that person well, whether it is family members, a great friend or a colleague who worked in partnership with them.

The reason Jesus spoke with such authority and such truth about God and his purposes and desires for his people was because Jesus himself came from the heart of God. He knew his heavenly Father personally and intimately. As the apostle John put it: *1¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in the closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.* This is why Jesus had a unique insight not only into God's Kingdom and God's purposes, but also into the heart of man.

The crowds weren't the only ones to recognise that Jesus had an innate authority – so, we are told, did the evil spirits: as the people said: *He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.* The evil spirit in the man in the synagogue recognised that Jesus was indeed the *Holy One of God*

Some of you might be dubious about demons or evil spirits but clearly some people were possessed by something that took over their lives and made them a living hell.

As a matter of interest only just this last Autumn I got this email from a local lady about a cottage she was doing up. Whenever she spent any time in this lovely cottage she was overwhelmed with a sense of sadness. When she tried to sleep in it overnight, she couldn't get a wink of sleep. She'd discovered that others had had the same experience in the cottage. So I went over there with Bronwen to meet her and we prayed into every room of this small cottage. When preparing this sermon, I realised that I hadn't actually heard back from her. So, I phoned her yesterday and I'm glad to say that the cottage now feels entirely peaceful and when she and another friend slept there overnight, they both had one of the best nights of sleep ever.

Now this may be unusual, but we all know that today many people are possessed by powerful forces - lusts, fears, anger, resentments, guilt, uncontrollable temper, habits, obsessions and addictions that can completely dominate their lives. Paul wrote: *8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.*

In recent years we've become aware of the danger of people being radicalised by deceptive philosophies whether the extreme beliefs of Islamic State, or extreme right-wing politics which can lead people to support and sometimes commit terrible violence.

Others are controlled by addictions or resentments or jealousies which have a terrible destructive effect not only on their own lives but on the lives of those around them.

the demonic forces that we give into that cause racial violence and domestic abuse.

the persuasive voices that entice people to throw their lives away for money, or sex or drugs.

We know that we can't defeat the evils or the demons around us and within us by ourselves.

We say " *a leopard can't change his spots*".

and " *you can't teach an old dog new tricks*"

The message of all the 12 step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous – is that the first step to recovery is to admit: " *my life out of control*" " *I am powerless overcome my addiction to alcohol or drugs...*

And the second step which is absolutely essential to recovery –

I acknowledge there is a higher power who is fully able to help me.

It is no surprise that the AA programme was started and developed by a committed Christian.

We don't have the strength or ability to defeat the social and spiritual evils around us and within us - we are powerless over the demons that afflict us.

There is only one power or authority that is able to defeat these destructive forces - in our lives and in our society - and that is Jesus Christ.

As Paul writes in our first reading: *He is the head over every power and authority... He disarmed the powers and authorities...triumphing over them by the cross.*

The tragedy is that so often rather than listen to his voice we listen to the voice of false prophets.

When I talk about false prophets, I am not talking about men with long beards and wild hair ranting and raving at a street corner

– we can spot them a mile off

– I am talking about the smooth, charming, plausible voices that we hear every day – on the radio and the TV – in our newspapers and magazines – the politicians and the advertisers, and nowadays more and

more the celebrities who have absolutely no expertise whatsoever but we listen to either because we are charmed by their carefully curated public persona, or because we envy their lives.

The truth is that they either have an axe to grind, a particular angle – something they want us to buy or support, or they are speaking ultimately from a place of ignorance.

We sometimes look back at the way we thought or behaved in the past and think how could we possibly have believed that or been so ignorant?

The answer is that that was what *everyone* believed or a prejudice that *everyone* shared.

The only one who speaks with true authority is the One who is from eternity to eternity, who has the heart and mind of God, who sees into the depths of our hearts and souls – Jesus. He is the one to whom we must listen, whose words and thoughts need to fill and saturate our own minds and hearts.

And wonderfully we have his words and indeed the word of our heavenly Father available to us in the Bible. Not only that, but Jesus has given us his Holy Spirit to enable us to understand his word and apply it to our own lives.

For if we don't listen to him, we will find ourselves listening to *false* voices whether in the media or culture around us or in our own hearts and minds.

and that is not just foolishness -

When there are so many evil and destructive forces both in the world around us and sometimes destructive forces in our own souls,
not to listen to Jesus is a matter of life and death.