

Epiphany 4 (Deuteronomy 18.15-20; Mark 1.21-18)

'They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.'

Authority can be a difficult topic because we tend to confuse it with power.

From a Christian perspective, Jesus is like Moses (hence our first reading): his authority comes from a relationship with God granted to no other. Speaking from that relationship he does not set out to provide conclusive answers to all questions, immediately alerting us to the character of God's preferred relationship with us, in which he does not seek to infantilize us. Jesus tells parables, stories which we have to internalize and inhabit, and commands us to 'go and do likewise'. As with Moses, we discover our Lord's authority as we work out the implications of obedience for our own situation.

Having celebrated the Christmas and Epiphany mysteries, we hear a final echo of the, in Candlemas on Tuesday. The three epiphanies (to the Magi, at the Baptism and at Cana) and supremely the Christmas revelation of John 1, 'the Word was made flesh', help us to understand the source of Jesus' authority. The implications of the Word of God being a person and not a book are still a struggle for most Christians, and between many Christians, so the default position, for safety's sake, seems always to be an authority that is more like power: openly in, say, the case of the papacy; more covertly in all other Christian churches, where the manipulation of scripture is often the means to power. We seem always to fear a lack of clear authority; we should recall that we are told 'do not be afraid'.

In today's Gospel we are given a picture of explicitly authoritative teaching from the person who is the Word of God, teaching immediately confirmed by authoritative action: an unclean spirit acknowledges who Jesus is, and is promptly cast out.

Christians who seek to demonstrate their faith by signs and wonders take texts like these as proof-texts. But look at what happens. We might anticipate that Jesus' exorcism would prompt bystanders to rejoicing and celebration. Jesus brings gifts that we imagine ourselves receiving with outstretched arms, but nothing in this story indicates that he was so received; this just made him made him better known. The story concludes

²⁸At once his *fame* began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Fame is ambiguous. As Vergil memorably noted in his famous simile in Aeneid 4, *fama*, rumour, may be a malign force, there spreading the news of Dido's attachment to Aeneas and causing terrible consequences; rumour spreads news, true and false, gathering interpretative momentum which has no allegiance to truth or consequences in the fame which follows, as we know from Twitter. So here the story gains currency, but we should notice Jesus spending much energy in subsequent chapters of Mark in trying to be *less* well-known, constantly telling those he's healed to speak to

no one, to keep it secret. He didn't court fame.

Jesus modelled authority without power, as the cross bears ultimate witness: the resurrection vindicates that reading for us Christians. The word 'authority' occurs twice in this morning's gospel. Remember these were *heard* texts for most of their history, written to be listened to. A careful listener would pick up such a repeated word and recall it when it recurs later. This gospel passage prepares the hearer for Mark 11.27-33

²⁷ Again they came to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him

²⁸ and said, "By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?"

²⁹ Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things.

³⁰ Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me."

³¹ They argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?'

³² But shall we say, 'Of human origin?'"-- they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet.

³³ So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

Mark means us to remember, when we get to chapter 11, that it is the people who are implicitly teaching *without* authority in today's gospel who attack him later. The beginning of Mark's gospel, and today's passage especially, are intended to give the church's answer to that question (not Jesus' answer, of course, because he doesn't give one).

Some Christians believe that miraculous events, if witnessed first-hand, produce unerring and unwavering faith. The Gospel writers know otherwise. They know that miracles demonstrate *power*, but power, like fame, comes from and tends to many places, good and evil. The Gospel writers know that understanding who Jesus is, and what his mission entails, involves far more than simply witnessing a miracle: lifelong learning about who Jesus is, and what he is about, is the space and process in which we find his authority. As with every aspect of Jesus' ministry, the miracles and the teaching provide at least as many questions as answers. That is more difficult than reading the instructions from a manual, but it is how *relationship* works - the relation of mature children to a loving parent, which is where Jesus wants us to be.