

The Text: Mark 1:21-22

These days when we sit in front of the TV we are faced with an overabundance of authorities on gardening, cooking, the stock market, sport, diets, the latest news, electronics, global warming, education, and world economics. The media loves to trot out authorities on almost any issue that arises. If the Prime Minister does something that the media thinks is a bit out of the ordinary, they will find an authority somewhere to make a comment.

What makes it interesting is that authorities can disagree with one another. They aren't interested in listening to anyone else's ideas. They are often manipulative and don't care if we take their advice and it all goes wrong. They often forget what humility is and don't know how to admit that another person might have an equally as good an idea as theirs. And so quite rightly we become sceptical and cynical of authorities and those proclaimed to be experts.

Today's Gospel reading from Mark tells us about Jesus' first preaching engagement in the synagogue at Capernaum. How come this young carpenter from Nazareth was given the job to preach that day? We need to understand how small synagogues worked. A synagogue in a local town had a "ruler"; someone who would take care of the synagogue and organise meetings, but he wasn't a preacher. That was left to the lay men who took it in turns. On this occasion Jesus was asked to read and explain the Scriptures.

We don't know what he read or what he said about the Scripture reading but it certainly left an impression. We are told, "*The people who heard him were amazed at the way he taught, for he wasn't like the teachers of the Law*". It's clear that the people there that day had heard many people speak about the Scriptures before, and maybe about the very passage that Jesus had read, but there was something different about the way Jesus spoke.

You see when the teachers of the Law and other experts spoke, they referred to other teachers of the Scriptures. They relied on the authority of other people – scribes and teachers of the Law who were very well respected and were held in high honour as interpreters of the word of God – but Jesus was different. He spoke with authority. *He* was the authority. He didn't need any other experts and authorities.

I would love to know what Bible passage Jesus spoke about that day. Jesus would have had their attention to the point that every mouth was open and every eye wide

open as they heard the voice of God speak to them. Jesus spoke to them with authority. Jesus needed no other human authority. He spoke with the authority of God the Father and the Holy Spirit who had pronounced their blessing on him at his baptism. He is God and spoke with the authority of God.

I'm sure there might have been some who were more astounded and shocked than amazed. Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, had just broken the long-held tradition of quoting the much respected teachers of the Torah...but there was no getting around the fact that *"he taught with authority"*.

Here already in chapter one, Mark establishes that Jesus has an authority that is different to every other human authority. We heard in the reading this morning about a man who came into the synagogue screaming and shouting and disrupting the gathering. Jesus ordered the evil spirit to come out of the man and again the people were completely amazed and said, *"This man has authority to give orders to the evil spirits, and they obey him"*. We hear the same thing repeated numerous times as Jesus heals the sick, raises the dead and calms storms. Jesus has authority over sickness, death, nature, and even Satan. On occasions when people witness Jesus' authority, say over the power of a storm they are left asking the question, *"Who is this man? Even the wind and waves obey him"*. They have never seen anything like it before.

What does all this have to say to us today? How do Aussies like us, who are so cynical about authority and people who claim to speak with authority, deal with someone who speaks with such absolute authority in our 21st century world?

I think this can be a real barrier for some people who are not used to someone speaking with such certainty and absolute authority. We live in a society where almost anything goes and to hear someone say, *"I am the only way to eternal life and only those who live and believe in me will live forever"* is regarded as offensive.

But regardless of how offensive this might sound, the truth is the truth and still needs to be spoken. As time went on during Jesus' time on earth, many were cynical about Jesus' authority to speak the way he did or to do what he did, but he had so much to tell those who were hungry to hear God's Word that he couldn't be stopped.

Jesus said with authority, *"I am the Light of the world"*. Other religious leaders and prophets have claimed to be divine lights shining in our world but only Jesus can back it up with authority.

Only he can give us security;

only he can guide us,

only he can help us through the darkest storms;

only he can light up the path that leads to peace and joy even though everything is going crazy;

only he can show us the path to eternal life;

only he can say it and mean it: *"If you follow me, you won't be stumbling through the darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life."*

He says, *"I am the Light of the Word"* because he has the authority to say it. He is the Son of God, once nailed to a cross, now, resurrected, ruling and reigning in heaven. He is the greatest authority there is in eternity.

With authority Jesus says, *"If you remain faithful to my teachings you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"* – you will be free from fear, nagging guilt, discouragement and hopelessness. You will be free from death and the door will be open to life forever.

Jesus told many parables and talked a lot about the Kingdom of God and what it means to live in the Kingdom of God. Sometimes his words were comforting and gracious reminding us of the goodness and mercy of our heavenly Father, and sometimes he spoke words of warning and judgment, reminding us that it's too easy to forget God's ways and follow the ways of the world. Sometimes he spoke provocatively and with vivid images to make people sit up and listen like: *"It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!"*

His word has come down to us today and it's powerful and comes with the same authority as if he were here speaking it in person.

When we hear the words, *"Your sins are forgiven"* this is true. It's spoken with authority regardless of whose lips are speaking those words.

When we read, *"I will be with you always"* it's true, regardless of the state of your mind or body at the time.

When someone reads to you Jesus' words, *"I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid"* (John 14:27 NLT), this is his word of authority. Believe it because he means it.

When we hear, *"This is my body and blood given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins"* this is his word of promise to us that what was achieved on the cross is ours. We are God's children, loved, forgiven, an heir of heaven – this is Jesus' word of authority to us.

I don't need to go through the whole of Scripture to emphasise that our Christian faith is not some airy fairy wishful thinking but is based on God's amazing words of authority. When Jesus speaks he always speaks with the human condition in mind. He speaks with love because he knows we all need forgiveness and without forgiveness we have no hope of entering heaven.

There are times in our lives when we wonder, "Lord, there is so much happening, I can't cope. I'm going down a fast flowing river in a row boat without any oars. It's out of control. I'm afraid that around the next bend I'll be smashed on rocks and go down. The stress and the worry are more than I can handle".

It's just at that time we cling to the strong word of Christ. It has authority and power. It promises us the support, the strength, and the ability to endure that only God can give. When we listen to the word and hold on to it no matter how feeble our grip might be, like the people in the synagogue, we too will be amazed. Amen.