

Mark 1:21-28

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St. Mary the Virgin

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What might it mean to have Authority?

Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he 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. 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." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Jesus is in Capernaum teaching, he casts out a demon, and returns to teaching. Hidden in these few verses are pointers to concepts that will be dominant in the rest of the Gospel. Jesus speaks with Authority and not as the scribes. We struggle to figure out what the distinction is and the best I can come up with is that the scribes spoke with reflected authority, they quoted Torah. Jesus speaks with his own Authority and for Mark that is a crucial thought and it enables him to do a New Thing. The rest of the Gospel will be spent pointing out what that New Thing is and I will get to it.

The other marker for how to read Mark's Gospel is in the recognition of the unclean spirits. They know who Jesus is from the very beginning when everyone around him was wondering who and what he was/is. The evil spirits know that Jesus has power. Those who listen to Jesus have no idea who he is. The unclean spirits know exactly who he is¹. The authorities don't have a clue as to who he is and if you read on into Mark you'll find that they even accuse Jesus of being one with the evil spirits² because how else could he command them? Of course, this is a ridiculous argument. Jesus threatens evil and the evil spirits. He is not one of them, but those who want to deny his authority will use any trick to diminish it.

We are called therefore to teach and preach with authority and use that authority to proclaim the gospel to those who need to hear it. We are also called to recognize and banish evil whenever and wherever we find it, defining evil as what the NT characterizes it as. That is, we are to work for those things which the NT supports, life in community, life lived recognizing the gospel's preferential option for the poor, life lived as fearless advocates for equality of all people regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation,

¹ A very recent article maintains that Mark is reflecting contemporary Jewish thought and shows dependence upon 1 Enoch, a pseudepigraphal work, parts of which predate the gospels. Nicholas A. Elder, *Scribes and Demons: Literacy and Authority in a Capernaum Synagogue (Mark 1:21-28)*, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 83/1 (2021) 75-64.

² Mark 3:20-30

education, place of birth, religion, and life lived seeking to uplift any other denigrated people. Anything which prevents us from life in community with a preferential option for the poor is against the gospel. The gospel does not know how to compromise. That is the New Thing.

Do you recognize our church, the Christian Church, not just the Episcopal Church or St. Mary the Virgin, but do you recognize the Christian Church as standing for these things? That is, for life in community, life lived recognizing the gospel's preferential option for the poor, life lived as fearless advocates for equality of all people regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, education, place of birth, religion, and life lived seeking to uplift any other denigrated people? Or would it be fairer to say that the Christian Church stands, given the focus of the last four years, the Christian Church stands to defend White Privilege?

The Christian church has frequently gone along with our culture and in recent years defined change as evil. More commonly we don't talk about evil, except to individualize it and say that certain acts are evil. Yet when we read the NT we find that Jesus doesn't talk about evil being certain acts, or in the lives of individuals, he says that evil is that which violates community, engenders violence and discrimination and leaves some with too few resources to survive or enjoy any quality of life. The Church has frequently acted as if some simply deserve to be poor because they've made such poor life choices. Especially they are at fault for not choosing their parents well.

People are right when they say that the American Church had more influence on American Life when we were the principle supporters of American White Culture. Pew Research³ recently republished a survey of Christian presidents and members of Congress. More Presidents have been Episcopalians than any other denomination. I can't tell that belonging to TEC made them more compassionate. I can't tell that it led them to lead with a preferential option for the poor. The church was the strongest pillar of society in the 50s and 60s. Unlike the Gospel the Church of the 50s and 60s stands for all things in moderation, at best. The gospel sees moderation as a temptation.

We are no longer a pillar of society. We didn't give up this role willingly or thoughtlessly. Instead the world around us determined that our cheerleading for the American Way was no longer necessary so it began to ignore us and society's turning away from the Church has led to diminished attendance, loss of financial stability and confusion, across all denomination, even the conservative ones. We didn't change but the world around us did. In other words people didn't leave because we became too liberal; they left because we became irrelevant.

A few years ago Robert P. Jones wrote, The End of White Christian America. I commend it to you. It is clear that the world around us changed. Some of us say that if we would just stand for the things we stood for in the 50s and 60s our pews would be full, but this is delusional. Times have changed and our relevance to the post-modern world is lost. It isn't coming back. The average Episcopalian is closer to my age than 30. Likewise for the median. The average Episcopal Priest is closer to my age than 40. Likewise for the median. We are aging into future irrelevance.

To return to the Gospel at some point in the early decades of what we call the 1st Century Jesus appears. He preached in a backward time and backward place, as we know from Jesus Christ Superstar. Judah and Galilee were insignificant to the Roman

³ <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/01/03/faith-on-the-hill-116/>

Empire. The Jewish people were occasionally fractious but not enough for Rome to generally notice and they were generally appeased by those Rome appointed over them. It was not a good time and it was not good to Jesus. He didn't come out of it alive.

Nevertheless he preached with authority and he cast out evil. 2000 years later we remember him and rejoice in his resurrection. Society's turning away from us gives us the chance to finally act with his authority and drive out the evil that exists in our midst. We are in a time of great hope because we have had the burden of endorsing the American Way lifted from us. In a world in which we are constantly told that there is not enough, so I have to hoard mine and protect it from you; in a world in which we are told constantly that some of us are by our birthright better than others, so I have to exclude you; in a world of deep insecurity and anger; in that world you and I have been called to preach a word of hope. That is the New Thing.

We have been called to say that choosing your parents is not an achievement, it's an accident. We have been called to say that meaning lies in caring for the poor, the outcast, the prisoners and any in need. We have been called to name evil and work against it. We have been called to community. That is the New Thing from the opening verses of this sermon.

The church does not exist to be the church. That would make us a club with social outreach. We exist to transform the world into a place in which hope prevails. With hope those who have, don't have to hoard, and those who have not, know that they will be generously cared for. Those who are sick will not compete with the healthy for resources but will know that we believe all should be well. For decades the church was captured by society and therefore we compromised the Gospel to reflect society. Today we have the chance to live the Gospel because the world around us has said that our support for it is irrelevant. This is a gift to us because it frees us to actually act. We have nothing to lose and everything to gain. We can work to bring in the Gospel.