A.M.D.G. Epiphany 4-B Text: Mark 1: 21-28

January 28th, 2018

***Mark 1 (a paraphrase) …*** The double blast of the trumpet signalled the start of the Sabbath. Jesus slowly made his way to the synagogue along with the other people of Capernaum. Entering the doorway, Jesus removed his sandals, covered his head with his mantle, and quietly went in. The limestone floor felt cool beneath his bare feet as he walked towards the back of the room and sat down. Many other people of the working class sat nearby: carpenters, blacksmiths, metal workers, farmers, potters, tent-makers. The synagogue leaders filed in and sat down on the benches at the front of the room. Soon everyone was listening in quiet contemplation to the prayers and readings of the day.

Then, Jesus stood up to teach. All eyes fastened upon him as he made his way to the centre of the synagogue. What would he say today? People were always astounded at his teaching, for he didn’t sound like any other teacher of the Law of Moses. “He preaches with power,” they said. “What authority in his words!”

Just as Jesus was about to speak, he looked over the heads of the people toward the door at the back of the room. People twisted their necks to see where Jesus was looking. There, in the doorway, crouched a man. Suddenly, the man sprang upright and shrieked, “You!” He waved his arms in the air and called out to Jesus, “What do you want with us?” He began to slouch through the room, and the people shrank away from him. “Jesus, leave him alone,” the people called. “This person is not in his right mind.” But Jesus did not move. The man came closer, still screaming. “You have come here to hurt us. I know who you are. You are God’s holy one and you have come here to make trouble.” The man was crying and shaking all over. His face was white. He was breathing very hard. “Enough!” said Jesus. Jesus knew this man needed help. With great love in his eyes, Jesus gently said, “The words you are saying are not your own. Because you are not well, because you feel mixed up and afraid, the things you are saying are mixed up.” And then Jesus touched the man and seemed to look beyond him. In a strong voice, Jesus said, “Be quiet! Come out of him.” The man felt a powerful surge go through him, and he fell to the floor, shaking and crying. Then suddenly, it was over. The man lay quiet. He felt calm. Tears of joy streamed down his face. The people in the synagogue were amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What’s happening here? This is a new teaching. Jesus talks like a person in charge. He even tells bad spirits what to do and they obey!”

At once, Jesus’ fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. Jesus spoke and acted with an amazing power, a power from God. It was a power of love, of compassion, and of caring for the hurting and lonely. And people wanted to know more.

**The Question Of Authority**

Three prominent Canadian politicians stepped down from leadership posts last week over allegations about their behaviour toward women as the #MeToo social media movement showed growing influence in this country as well as south of the border.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that Ken Hehr, Federal Minister of Sport and Disabilities, had resigned while the government investigates accusations that he made inappropriate comments to women.

That announcement followed the resignation of Patrick Brown as leader of the Progressive Conservatives in Ontario – and party hopeful for winning the upcoming June election for Premier. And in Nova Scotia, Jamie Baillie, leader of the PCs in that province, resigned over similar allegations.

They are just the latest high profile Canadians to see their careers derailed by allegations of sexual misconduct since the victims of sexual harassment and abuse launched the #MeToo movement south of the border in October of last year – beginning with the Harvey Weinstein scandal in the movie industry.

As Oprah Winfrey said recently in her speech at the Golden Globes Awards – “*A new day is on the horizon*!” – a time of reckoning – a time of exposing and bringing to light the sexual abuse and inappropriate behaviour that has been the accepted norm in the boardrooms and in the workplace everywhere. The #MeToo movement is about power – its use and abuse – and about giving a voice and empowering those who have been forced into silence for far too long.

Questions of power and authority also permeate our scripture reading this morning. It is early in the ministry of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. Remember – unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark has no birth narrative, no childhood stories. Instead, he begins with John the Baptist preparing the way with his preaching, and with the baptism of Jesus – and then jumps immediately into the calling of the disciples and the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. And that is where we find ourselves today.

From the beginning, Jesus demonstrated a different way of being in the world – a different way of looking at others and being in relationship. The passage this morning starts in the synagogue, with Jesus teaching. But not just any kind of teaching.

Unlike the scribes – the educated leaders of the day – we are told that Jesus taught as one ‘*with authority’*. And it is not just the content of what he had to say. In fact, Mark tells us very little about the actual teaching itself. But there was that indescribable ‘something’ that Jesus brought to the table – and which caused those present to sit up and take notice.

-3-

The very presence of Jesus radiated something that was missing in the regular teaching of the scribes. It was the marriage or integration of the authority of what he said and who he was, that captured the imagination and hope of those who witnessed it.

In today’s world, we often use the words ‘power’ and authority’ interchangeably. But for our purposes this morning, I would like to make a distinction between the two. In fact, the two words are also different as they appear in Mark’s gospel as well. The Greek word for ‘authority’ used in this passage is ‘*exousia’*, while the Greek word translated as ‘power’ is ‘*dunamis’,* from which we get the word for dynamite.

A modern illustration of these two different meanings can be seen in the roles of a truck driver and a traffic officer. An eighteen wheeler truck has inherent strength and so its driver has direct or ‘*dunamis*’ power at his disposal to perform his task. While a traffic officer has insufficient physical power to stop a truck, he does have authority or ‘*exousia’* at his disposal. When the traffic officer puts up his hand, the truck driver stops his vehicle, because behind that gesture lies the whole weight or authority of the Police Department.

If we peer into the world in which Jesus lived – the scribes, along with the Pharisees and the Saducees had the *‘dunamis’* or ‘power’. They were in control. They were the interpreters of the law. They decided what and who were acceptable – and what and who were not. They were part of the *‘cultural power structure’* of their day. Their power came from their position and office – not necessarily from the support and confidence of the people – a distinction that the gospel writer makes clear when he says: *“They were astounded at Jesus’ teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”*

Dictators, for example, may be powerful because they have control over the government and often the military as well – but lack genuine authority in the hearts and minds of the people. The apartheid regime may have had power in South Africa for many years – but a jailed man by the name of Nelson Mandela had the authority. Some say that is also the difference between the styles of Presidents Obama and Trump – one leading with the ‘authority’ of personal integrity and moral conscience, and the other through coercive ‘power’ and bullying.

Our gospel reading today illustrates for us that to have ‘power’ does not necessarily mean you have ‘authority’. Jesus had the authority – but in the end, it was the scribes and Pharisees that had the power to call for his crucifixion. People gravitate toward genuine authority because it is persuasive, because it speaks to the heart, because it exudes that extra ‘something’ that is recognized as being different, authentic, and hope-filled.

-4-

Jesus’ authority came from more than what he said – although that was important and profound. His authority came from his sense of call, his integrity, his compassion, his caring, his acceptance – and his integrated sense of knowing himself to be loved by God, and his desire that others would know the same. Mark makes it clear in his gospel from the beginning that Jesus’ authority came from being Spirit filled and Spirit led – from who he was, and who he encouraged others to be, and how he lived his life. And in doing so, he modelled for us a way of living with integrity as children of God.

As Christians – as followers of Christ – we are called to exercise that same sense of integrity and authority in the world around us. Not necessarily to use whatever ‘power’ may be ours by virtue of our positions, our wealth, or our status. But to take the authority that God has given us to life a life that is Spirit-filled and integrated – a life where our words and actions speak loudly and clearly of justice, peace, and love in our relationships, in our workplaces, in our dealings with others, and even here in the church. As followers of Christ, we are given the authority to speak and to live with integrity, in ways that show compassion, that empower others, that respect differences of opinion and experience. And we are challenged to evaluate our actions every time we build ourselves up at someone else’s expense, when we stand silent in the face of injustice, or when we seek to influence others to consolidate our own power and position.

Power and authority play an important role in our lives. In today’s scripture reading, Jesus models for us the authority of a Spirit-filled life lived with integrity and compassion. May God give us the courage to speak and act, following his example – with willingness, faith and determination. Amen