

As I read this Gospel reading this week I was reminded of a story I heard a long time ago involving the great Pope John the 23<sup>rd</sup>. One day the pontiff was having an audience with a group of people, one of whom was the mother of several children. At one point the pope said to this woman, "Would you please tell me the names of your children. I realize that anyone in this room could tell me their names, but something very special happens when a mother speaks the names of her own children."

I suspect we know what the pope meant. And maybe it was something like this that the people sensed about Jesus in our Gospel today. There was a question of authority? Why did people sense authority in Jesus' presence? How did they recognize his authority and what was so compelling about it? It was his teaching. *"He taught as one who had authority."* What is this teaching that so astonished Jesus' hearers?

We don't know. Not a word of Jesus' teaching is remembered here in Capernaum. Whatever it was that so astonished people was not written down for us to hear. It is rather odd that in Mark's gospel, where Jesus is called "Teacher" over and over again ~ by disciples, by the crowd, by Pharisees and Herodians ~ very few of Jesus' teachings are remembered. In Mark, there is no Sermon on the Mount as in Matthew. Nor will you find many of Luke's parables. And we will never know what Jesus taught here in Capernaum ~ we only know how he taught: *"as one who had authority, and not as the scribes."*

That, too, is rather odd. For authority seems to be precisely what the scribes had! They could claim the authority of written words passed down through many generations. They had the authority of tradition ~ a kind of laying on of hands from the time of Moses. They had the prestige of religious leadership, the authority of clerical position and power. But somehow Jesus taught with authority surpassing all these claims. Somehow more compelling, more authentic to those who heard him. What sort of authority was this? His authority was in his intimacy to his knowledge about God. When this Jesus fellow talked about God, it was like hearing a mother intone the names of her own children—the love and the personal involvement Jesus had with his subject matter made it clear that this was not coming out of his head so much as his heart.

In Mark's gospel **Jesus himself is the content of the teaching**. The authority is not in particular speeches, but in this particular life - in his intimacy of his knowledge about God. Jesus lived as one who had authority, an authority radically different from that of tradition. Different from what had been expected.

But perhaps, it is not the question of authority that is the main focus of this passage.

Which leads me to a second idea. Recall with me for a moment that the evangelists – the Gospel writers are as much artists as they are historians, as interested – actually, *more* interested – in telling a good story than they are in getting the facts right. Which means that each and every time we read from their work we are invited to notice the details of their art in order to grasp the theological claim of their witness.

And the detail to notice here is simply that Mark begins his account of Jesus' public ministry with a confrontation.

First events give insight into the larger themes and, particularly, a distinct understanding of Jesus' mission and character in each of the Gospels. In Matthew, Jesus is a teacher and (new) lawgiver like Moses. In John, he creates unexpected and unimaginable abundance. In Luke, he is the one who releases those held captive, heals the ill and infirm, and proclaims good news to the poor and the Lord's favor to all. And in Mark...he picks a fight with an unclean spirit.

Mark's Gospel, that is, in telling of the ministry of Jesus, starts with a confrontation. Whatever dramatic value beginning with a fight scene might initially promise, however, there is little doubt of who will win this showdown. The spirit protests Jesus' very presence, and Jesus casts him away with a command as authoritative as

it is succinct. And because of Jesus' bold teaching and power over this spirit of oppression, his fame spreads quickly.

Keeping in mind the importance of first events, we can read this scene as Mark's signal that Jesus has come to oppose all the forces, everything that possesses us, and keeps the children of God from the abundant life God desires for all of us. And that message matters because it is still the case: God wants the most for us from this life and stands in opposition to anything that robs us of the joy and community and purpose for which we were created.

Our God is a God of the broken, and our church is a fellowship of the needy. That's pretty much all it takes, as we'll see during this year-long sojourn with Mark, to be a member of Jesus' disciples then or now: recognition of your deep need and trust that Jesus has come to meet it.

Mark shares this story of confrontation and freedom first because it's at the heart of the Gospel story he tells and Gospel story we are invited to live into and through.

It is important that we hear in this story of God's promise to be with us and for us always. That we acknowledge the intimacy of the relationship between Jesus and the God of scripture. God continues to be at work in our lives and the world calling us into a deeper experience with The Creator. This passage still has the capacity to set people free and God is using our words and witness and work to help do just that. Amen.