

‘They were amazed at His teaching, because He taught them as One who had authority’.

Authority is expressed and experienced in all kinds of ways, such as the teacher in the classroom, the surgeon in the operating theatre, the judge in a court of law, the conductor with an orchestra, the persuasive politician as seen in the recent dramatic film *Darkest Hour*, or even sometimes a thing like a speed camera, which a year ago caught me out and sent me on a speed awareness course! Despite attempts in my shame to be incognito someone recognised me and smiled knowingly.

But each of those examples only has a limited authority and to a specific responsibility.

The Gospel records however reveal that the person, Jesus Christ, had an authority in all walks of life beyond the human and by a simple but powerful word, and each demonstration of authority was a foretaste of his ultimate victory.

The dismissal of an evil presence, as in today's Gospel, was a sign of the victory He would win over all the powers of evil, the defeat of the devil and the triumph of good over evil.

Elsewhere we read of the way He calmed a raging storm, as a sign of the one day reordered creation.

Or His healing of many sick people served as a promise that one day there would be no more suffering and pain

Or His raising of three dead people back to life was a sign of His own resurrection and that of those who who put their trust in Him, that glorious Christian hope we affirm in the creed, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

His power and authority initiated His kingdom of justice, peace, hope and wholeness in His lifetime, was unlimited, and pointed to His ultimate victory.

He even claimed that ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me’.

This was outrageous at one level but not of course if we recognise Him as the Son of God. It was fully in keeping with who He was.

And this is the extraordinary conviction for us as Christians to believe, that the supreme authority over the world resides in His hands. That is why we call Him our Lord Jesus Christ.

Not unexpectedly His claim to divine authority and identity brought a serious challenge from the people of His day, especially those who were unwilling to submit to His authority. Eventually that opposition led to His staged arrest, His unjust trial, His cruel torture and His humiliating crucifixion. He was too uncomfortable to have around and was best done away with.

So He wasn't just another teacher doing the rounds. And I sometimes wonder how well He would be received today if He were to turn up in person? Would He be viewed with suspicion? Would He be considered not politically correct? Would He be viewed as intolerant? Would He get through the selection procedure to be ordained in the Church of England?

‘They were amazed at His teaching, because He taught as One who had authority’.

That authority came from who He was, the second person of the Trinity, the Word made flesh. It was not a surprise that He should teach that way. As the poet John Betjeman put it, ‘God was man in Palestine’ and inevitably His teaching was with authority.

That all raises important questions for us and how we His people today carry on His work and ministry.....

1. The importance of the role of teaching

The role of teaching within church life has taken a hit over the years.

Loss of confidence means we are often too uncertain

Loss of clarity means we are often too muddled

Loss of creativity means we are often too dull

Loss of relevance means we are often too obscure.

Just as they were amazed at the authority of His teaching, so we must regain confidence in that teaching role about who God is, what He has done and what He requires of us.

And that applies not just to the preacher but to all disciples of Christ.

2. The importance of the source of our teaching

Do we just make it up? Or do we hold faithfully to the teaching that we find in the Scriptures?

The Bible has come in for much criticism over the years, but it is still the touchstone and benchmark of our faith. Without it we would not know where to start and would only be guessing about God and salvation and eternal life and forgiveness. The Bible is the Word of God, which on a special occasion years ago was described as:

‘The most valuable thing this world affords’

It is not a collection of nice stories or irrelevant accounts of ancient history, but a record of God’s activity through history in the world and supremely in His Son, Jesus Christ.

Here is our authority to teach what God has already revealed, and it is inspired and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be complete and equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3.16)

3. The importance of courage in our teaching

To faithfully teach and pass on what Jesus taught will not be universally popular. It wasn't then and it isn't today. The preacher and teacher is not called to say what people want to hear, but to convey the truth as God has revealed it. Every Christian disciple is called upon to share the faith with others, not just the clergy.

To follow the footsteps of our Master may easily lead to trouble, conflict, ridicule, and in other parts of the world to terrible persecution and suffering.

And that calls those of us who believe to hold on to the promise that one day it will be different and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. At present when there is so much suffering and conflict, injustice and inhumanity in the world it is far from obvious that He is Lord and so we hold on in faith that He is and that one day that will be seen to be the case.

The message for us from the Gospel today is one of hope, that extraordinarily against all the odds and contrary to all appearances, Jesus, a man who lived 2000 years ago and who was driven out of this world, is in fact the One who has ultimate authority over all the affairs of the world and will return one day to judge the living and the dead.

I love the anonymous piece ‘One Solitary life’ because it makes the point that over the centuries and around the world today Jesus has and continues to wield huge influence and authority. Let me conclude with it to boost our confidence....

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village, where He worked in a carpenter's shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher. He never had a family or owned a home. He never set a foot inside a big city. He never travelled 200 miles from the place where He was born. He never wrote a book, or held office. He did none of the things that usually accompany greatness.

While He was still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against Him. His friends deserted Him. He was turned over to His enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While He was dying, His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had, His coat. When He was dead, He was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave.

*Over two thousand years have passed and today He is the central figure of much of the human race. All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat,put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as this
ONE SOLITARY LIFE.*

To Him be all the glory...Amen.