

Mark 1:21-28 – The Authority of Jesus

In the Gospel for today we hear how Jesus preached and taught with authority. He spoke with the authority of the Word – not as one who must learn that Word first, but as the one who wrote them. He shows His authority over demons – not with the force of might but with His righteousness. He ruled the wind and the wave – not as some display of raw power but as the One to whom the wind and wave must answer. But nowhere is His authority more pronounced than when our Lord forgives sins. Every other authority led the people around Him to marvel but the authority to forgive sins was too much for them.

The word authority here is *εχουσια*. It is an authority unlike the people of God had ever known or experienced before. Jesus addressed matters of faith and life very differently than the teachers of old or even the prophets. It was not that He was a good teacher or a good wordsmith or a good preacher – His authority drew from His very self – the Word of God made flesh. This is the authority of weight, of right, of domain.

In a worldly sense, authority is power – the ability to enforce your words with actions that compel people to pay attention to you and obey you. Jesus appears to have little power in this sense of authority. He comes to suffer and die. He is the victim, the sacrificial offering. His authority is manifested not in making people serve Him but in serving the world with His righteous life, faithful service, obedient and sacrificial death.

Jesus refuses the sword of the world. He insists to Pilate that His kingdom is not of this world. He tells Peter to put away his weapon. It will not be brought about or sustained by armies, weapons, and fear. His sword is His Word. He speaks and it is done. That was the way all things came to be in creation and now He lays down the script for what is to come at Calvary and the empty tomb. He keeps His Word; its truth is sufficient for all people and for all time.

What is new about this authority is it is not derived. Almost all authority on earth is derived from someone or something. But not Jesus. He is the Word made flesh. He incarnates what He is come to say and do. He is the flesh around the words that people spoke for Him and of Him in the past. He is still the Word that speaks even when He borrows our own voices.

His power is not the threat that compels in fear but the promise that delivers what it says. Here is the surprise of grace. Where people had become accustomed to seeing God as a potentate who rules like earthly rulers, Jesus shows the power of mercy. He manifests a greater power than every earthly form in the grace that gives to the undeserving God's everlasting favor.

Jesus does not manipulate language. He does not lie, He does not shade the truth, rather, He is the way, the truth, and the life. We too often presume that Jesus authority lies in His ability to inspire but He is not come to inspire us. He is come to save us, quite apart from either our request or our desire. He does so even though this salvation comes at the cost of His very life given up to the suffering and death of the cross.

In the Church we tire of all of this. We want power, raw power, earthly power. Pastors, too. We grow weary of the authority of love and long to exercise worldly authority. But Jesus will have none of it. It will not be as it is in the world where people lord it over one another for personal gain. Jesus has given His Church a very different authority the likes of which the world has never seen before.

This authority is cross shaped. It speaks the new vocabulary of grace. It is the Word that does what it says. It is in people who confess it with words and live it in actions. It is messy and slow and the world laughs at this authority and calls it weakness. Heaven and earth will pass away but not the works of those who wield the Word of the Lord nor the actions of those who serve others in His name. In the end it is about forgiveness – stealing the domain of sin and its death from a people who have lived in its shadow so long they think its natural.

Jesus has authority. He has placed His authority in His Word. He has placed His Word in our hearts and minds by the power of the Holy Spirit. His Word is efficacious – it has the Spirit in it and working through it – so that it does exactly what it says. It delivers us from guilt. It forgives our sins. It calls out our demons. It stills the storms of life. And it does so with the force of grace. And where we will exercise this authority, the Kingdom of God will come. He whose Word it is has promised us this, today, tomorrow, and forever.