

Sermon Preached at the Eucharist Epiphany IV, 29 January 2012

Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle by

The Dean of Newcastle, The Very Reverend Dr James Rigney

Authority is something with which we all struggle. We may struggle to exercise authority. We may struggle to live under it. Not many of us are as clear-headed as the centurion in the gospels, who entreats Jesus to heal his servant. When Jesus says he will come to help him the centurion replies:

Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed.

For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it.

When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, 'I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith'. (Matthew 8.8-10)

The centurion has a clear vision of authority and his relation to it. And he recognises the authority of Jesus: that is the point of his reflection. He does not need Jesus to appear in his house; he has come to Jesus because he knows that Jesus has the power and the authority to do what he desires.

Acknowledgement of authority is the starting and finishing point of this morning's gospel. There are two areas in which Jesus' authority is manifested and recognised. The first of these is in his teaching and the second is in the exorcising of the demon.

Throughout Mark's gospel, teaching and exorcism go together. Mark is particularly interested in Jesus as an exorcist. And that is also something with which we might struggle. Miracles of any kind are hard enough for some of us to accept in scripture but exorcism is particularly challenging. We no longer consider epilepsy or mental illness as signs of demonic possession (even though we are as inclined as our first century ancestors to exclude and to keep away from people who suffer this way).

It might help us to cross the apparent distance between the world of Jesus and our own if we consider that the notion of possession might have been an ancient way of recognising that there are times when we are caught up in forces that are not genuinely us, but are so powerful and compelling that they seem to possess us. This can happen to nations, to communities and to individuals.

Jesus approaches this problem from a point that places primary emphasis on Jesus as a teacher. As I said this is a characteristic theme in Mark's gospel.

When the disciples call on him to wake from his sleep and save them from the storm they cry: 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' (Mark 4.38). When his friends try to dissuade the leader of the synagogue from asking Jesus to heal his daughter they say: 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?' (Mark 5.35) When a father finds the disciples incapable of curing his son he addresses Jesus: Someone from the crowd answered him, 'Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak...' (Mark 9.17) It is from his identity as a preacher that Jesus confronts the demon in this morning's gospel.

What are the marks of demon-behaviour not just on the possessed individual but on the communities in which they live, or try to live? Rather than bless, the demons curse; rather than build up, they tear down; rather than encourage, they disparage; rather than promote love, they sow hate; rather than draw us together, they seek to split us apart. Against that behaviour and influence the gospels place the behaviour and influence of Jesus. We can find ourselves victims of such possession.

Here is a congregation with evil in their midst. The man possessed by the unclean spirit was in the centre of the synagogue. - When Jesus 'entered' the synagogue (v.21), the same word used here εἰσερχομαι can be used to describe how Satan or an unclean spirit 'enters' someone. Something wrong enters the synagogue, and then something right enters. And for all the talk about harmony that churches use to cover up and get along with that kind of evil, Jesus won't tolerate it.

The evil has got to go. Exorcism represents an act of confrontation in which Jesus asserts his alternative authority. This is why exorcism is such an issue in the scribal counterattack upon Jesus: 'By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?' (Mark 11.28)

The power and authority to do this comes, as Mark insists, from the teaching. It is when the word of God enters into a place that the power to drive out evil also arrives.

As we prepare for *Back to Church Sunday* we need to be a community in which the life-giving teaching of Jesus is present and at work. Those who we invite back need to find a fellowship that will bless them and not curse them, that will build them up rather than tear them down, that will encourage them rather than discourage them; a community that promotes love rather than hate.

*Back to Church Sunday* is an invitation to us to invite others to a restorative community gathered under the authority of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.