

Apologetics.4 Authority

Pray

We don't like the word "authority." Authority implies top-down power, grating against individual freedom, a superior, arrogant outlook. Authority and its use or abuse is an objection people level at religion.

We see how people abuse their authority — government officials flying somewhere warm during a pandemic lockdown, and even in church; so sad when a trusted leader falls. Look at the abuse hurled at parents, teachers, referees, umpires, coaches, managers – abuse in the sports world that is currently curbed by the pandemic, with few or no fans in the stands to hurl insults. C'mon Ref! That doesn't stop some from throwing a foam brick at the TV at a missed call! So wrapped up in the game! Some people tell a specific and painful story of the abuse of authority.

The human struggle with authority is nothing new. The Bible speaks of the importance of authority and also the struggle with it. Perhaps one of the saddest verses in the bible, the last verse of the OT book of Judges, clearly shows the chaos when there IS no authority, 'everyone did what was right in their own eyes, because there was no king' (Jdgs 21:25). The NT books, especially the epistles, were written to churches that were rife with disunity because they were not living under the authority of God.

As we explore the Gospel reading for today, Mark 1:21-28, seeing Jesus exercising authority wisely in teaching and healing, we are equipping ourselves with something that will make sense in our minds, what we cherish in our hearts; that understanding the authority of Jesus and how he exercised authority, is not only a good thing, but crucial to defending the faith.

To respond to criticism about authority in religion, think of the author of our faith; the author of life and the author of our salvation speaks to the authority we hold.

Bishop Tom Wright tells a story of a great disaster at sea, reported in the Los Angeles Times. A tourist boat, loaded with cars and trucks and tourists, had failed to shut its doors properly; frigid North Sea water began pouring in; the boat began to sink, and panic set in, all diesel and electrical power suddenly were gone. People were screaming in the dark as the happy, relaxed atmosphere of the ship turned in 90 seconds into something worse than a horror movie.

All at once, one man, not a member of the crew, took charge. In a clear voice he gave orders, telling people what to do. Panic mixed with relief as people realized someone was in charge, and many managed to reach lifeboats they would otherwise have missed in the dark and the rush. The man himself made his way down to people trapped in the hold. There he began forming a human bridge - the man was 6' 3' - holding on with one hand to a ladder and with the other, to part of the ship that was nearly submerged, he enabled more to cross to safety. When the nightmare was over, the man himself was found to have drowned. He had literally given his life, including saving the life of his wife and his daughter, in using the authority he had assumed – the authority by which many had been saved. * (see below)

Take that picture to a different lake shore, that of Galilee and listen for another voice, the one voice whose resonance had an ancient quality to it, a voice that reached back, as if to the beginning of time, yet coloured with the local cadence of a man from the back country of Galilee, the same voice that compels fisherman to follow. It speaks again, this time in a place of worship, in a town by lake. It's the Sabbath, the day of rest from the other busynesses of life and take time to listen to biblical teaching. Jesus gives then more than they bargained for; he speaks to someone who calls out during church, someone with an unclean spirit that has taken up residence in a man.

Unlike the disciples in the previous verses in Mark, the unclean spirit speaks back to Jesus, even calling Jesus by name and claiming to know who he is, hissing resistance: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!" (Mark 1:24). Is this an affirmation or an affront? Is the unclean spirit testifying or picking a fight? Either way, the unclean spirit has some moxie talking back.

Engaging in conversation, giving a reason for the faith we hold dear, is the point of the sermon series. It's less about talking back in a defensive posture but listening to people's concerns or criticism and responding gently and respectfully, without judgement, giving an answer for the hope in our hearts. Last week we were considering OMG - the knee-jerk expression of *disbelief*, as an opening for talking *about belief*. Handled correctly, OMG-shock can turn, as it does from the lips of Jesus, into desperate prayer, look at Psalm 22, prayer to the God who is really there, and who really does care, my God and your God.

In accordance with God's will, for the sake of others, Jesus raises his voice, with authority rooted in the fear of, deep trust, in the Lord. Words matter. Do your words hurt or heal?

Most of us want just enough teaching to get by and still remain in control of our lives. Jesus taught with authority because holiness is not up for debate. Jesus taught with authority because the gospel is not an opinion. Our hearts balk at teaching with authority and we try to wriggle away and reason it out ourselves.

Trouble is when we fail to build our identity on God whose authority is trustworthy, two things happen: We struggle for a sense of worth, purpose, distinctiveness, often experienced as anxiety, insecurity and anger. Second, an identity not based on the authority of God, can lead to marginalizing, oppressing and excluding others. Religion and Christianity can seem unattractive in such a case, leaving many confused about the real nature of Christianity.

Tim Keller argues in his book Reason for God, that there is a great gulf between the understanding that God accepts us because of our efforts, and the understanding that God accepts us because of what Jesus has done. Keller makes a distinction between Religion and the Gospel. He defines Religion as operating on the principle, I obey – therefore I am accepted by God." He defines Gospel as "I am accepted by God through what Christ has done – therefore I obey."

When you come to follow Jesus, the centre of authority has shifted, from me and my efforts to be good, to what Jesus has already done. In Christ I know I am accepted by grace, not only despite my flaws, but because I am willing to admit them. Because I am willing to admit my

flaws, I can be open and accepting of all other people. Prejudice plummets. My tattered, fragile self-esteem is not threatened by anything or anyone. Bring on his authority, his gentle, loving, self-giving rule! The Christian Gospel is that I am so flawed that Jesus had to die for me, yet I am deeply loved and valued and that Jesus was glad to die for me, to be that bridge out of the dark of my fear and self-authority.

To paraphrase Keller, “the Gospel undermines both swagger and snivelling” in the Christian faith – the swagger of pride that Christians need to beat up others with the truth or, on the other hand, the sniveling shame that Christianity and all religions are to blame for the world’s disunity, leaving us feeling insecure in our faith. We need to remind ourselves of one central Christian distinctive, seen so clearly in Jesus’ teaching and example; grace. We can hear Amazing Grace sung many times but have we really considered what grace is?

When we hear about grace it can be threatening. Listen to a woman who began attending a church in New York. She had never heard of the distinction between gospel and religion. She had always heard that God accepts us, only if we are good enough. She felt that the new message was scary. She said, “If I was saved by my good works then there would be a limit to what God could ask of me or put me through. I would be like a taxpayer with ‘rights’ – I would have done my duty and now I would deserve a certain quality of life. But I am a sinner saved by sheer grace – then there’s nothing God cannot ask of me.” (Reason for God pg 183)

She understood the dynamic of grace and gratitude, and that it had an edge to it. She knew that if Jesus really had done this all for her, she would not be her own any longer. She would joyfully, gratefully belong to Jesus, who provided all this for her, at infinite cost to himself, not to coerce or oblige but for an inner joy, a joy that sometimes needs rekindling. Think of what happens when you fall in love. You ask, “Do you want to hang out?” Or “Will you marry me?” What happens when the answer is “Yes!,” do you say, “Great. Now I’ll just go off and do whatever I want?” Of course not. Your allegiance has shifted. You belong to the other. You do what pleases the object of your love. There’s no coercion or obligation yet your behaviour has been radically changed by the heart and mind of the person you love.

The founders of most other major religions essentially came as teachers, Moses, Muhammed, Bhudda, not as Saviours. But Jesus came essentially as a saviour rather than solely as a teacher although he clearly killed at that, Jesus essentially says: I am the divine come to you, to do what you could not do for yourselves. The Christian message is that we are saved not by our record of good and bad, but by Christ’s record. So, Christianity is not religion or irreligion; it’s more of a dance. And we’ll talk about that another time.

If someone baulks at the authority of religion, suggest they look at the life and teaching of Jesus, his authority is unbeatable; authority based on the author of life and the author of our salvation. Even the demons knew it.

Magnify with me, won’t you?

Thanks be to God.