

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
February 1, 2009
Mark 1:21-28

“We Have It On Good Authority”

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

This morning our attention is drawn to the word "authority". In the present world situation it is a word that is used much even if people debate what it suggests. We are all very aware of what authority is and how people exercise it. The word also has various meanings. It can mean power by the use of force or an influence by the use of words to convey a message and command respect and obedience. So it is that in the world there are often various manifestations of authority. We could say for example that the President of the United States is a man of authority first in the sense of his being the commander-in-chief of the armed forces of the United States. But at the same time the President is also a man of authority by the manner in which he influences people by his words as he attempts to influence policy by the use of argument and rhetoric and all of the skills of a politician. Each of these aspects are part of the exercise of authority in word and also in deed. In the Gospel lesson for this morning, we also hear about authority--the authority, power, and rule of our Lord Jesus Christ. And this emphasis is most appropriate for this Sunday in the Epiphany season--a time when the church recalls the manifestation and showing forth of Jesus Christ to all the world. Our text helps us answer the question asked by the people in Capernaum as they witnessed the work and teaching of Jesus. "What is this?" As our theme would remind us: "We Have It on Good Authority."

I. Authority in Word

The account of our text is the first miracle of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of St. Mark. It begins the section of the Gospel which in its theme portrays Jesus as the Son of God in word and deed. Therefore, we follow Jesus immediately after the calling of the first disciples into the city of Capernaum beside the Sea of Galilee. Upon his entrance into the village he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath to teach. As our text says: 22 And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. Jesus' teaching was so different from that with which the people were familiar. He was not speaking as the rabbis or the scribes did. Jesus brought a new message--the message referred to in the verses preceding our text: THE TIME HAS COME. THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS NEAR. REPENT AND BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS (Mark 1:15) Jesus' words brought astonishment and a sense of wonder to these listeners. Now this was a much better reaction than that which accompanied Jesus' teaching in the synagogue at Nazareth. For there He had to escape from the angry crowd who wished to stone him. As Jesus said on that occasion: NO PROPHET IS ACCEPTED IN HIS OWN COUNTRY. But in this instance we see the power of Jesus exercising His authority in Word. Indeed we see as well a fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken through Moses in our Old Testament Lesson, "The Lord your God will raise

up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers, it is to him you shall listen ...” (Deuteronomy 18:15)

II. Authority in Deed

Yet the questions of His hearers regarding Him and His authority would suddenly be answered in a most remarkable way and from a most unusual source. For even evil itself would witness to Him. Our text goes on to relate the encounter of a man possessed by an unclean spirit. It is not the only time in the Gospel where we see Jesus confront a person possessed by a devil and yet there is a uniqueness to this incident. As pointed out earlier, this is the first miracle of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of Mark. It is also the second witness to the person of Jesus Christ in this book. The first witness is the voice of the Father speaking from heaven at Jesus' baptism announcing: YOU ARE MY BELOVED SON. The second witness comes from a most unusual source. Listen again to the words of the text: “And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, “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.” But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him.” (v.23-26) The spirit--the servant of Satan--is a most amazing witness to Jesus. He calls him the HOLY ONE OF GOD. There is also fear and terror evident in the words of this unclean spirit. He fears that Jesus has come to destroy them. The spirit knows who is Master here. And Jesus rebukes the spirit telling him to be silent and to come forth which happens as the man is convulsed and the spirit departs with a shriek. Jesus showed his authority over the devil and the powers of evil. His authority was shown not just in word but also in deed. And the crowd that witnessed all these things was even more amazed. They ask among themselves: "WHAT IS THIS? A NEW TEACHING--AND WITH AUTHORITY! HE EVEN GIVES ORDERS TO EVIL SPIRITS AND THEY OBEY HIM." (v.27) And as our text continues, the NEWS ABOUT HIM SPREAD QUICKLY OVER THE WHOLE REGION OF GALILEE. (v.28)

III. His Authority for Us

What is this? We Have It on Good Authority. What does this mean for us in the twentieth century, to us here at Mt. Olive (or to those of you listening on the radio) on this 1st day of February in 2009? What authority indeed? In this account related in the Gospel for today we see a summary of the work of Jesus Christ.

For as he showed His authority over that unclean spirit so we know that He has conquered the devil for us as well. Now we may not be possessed by an unclean spirit like the man in our text, but we too see the power of evil around us. We see the consequences of sin. We know the fears that may be engulfing all of us in this time of economic uncertainty and recession. We may feel there is nowhere to turn for help.

In our natural condition we are enslaved by sin. Jesus has overcome that sin and evil. As the Holy One of God he became sin for us. It is quite significant that the final witness to Jesus as

the Son of God in the Gospel of Mark also comes from an unusual source. You are familiar with the story. At the death of Jesus upon the cross it was the Roman centurion who exclaimed: TRULY THIS MAN WAS THE SON OF GOD! What a manifestation of authority that was--for in His death there was victory. It was not a victory according to the world's standards of measurement but on Easter Sunday our Lord showed forth the victory over death and the devil. So we too can confess and proclaim that he is the Son of God and the Savior of the world. The people in his day were amazed at his teaching and at his miracles and they wondered at Him. We too should stand amazed at what God has done for sinful mankind--for me, for you, for all who believe in him.

Conclusion

So we have it on good authority. It is the authority and power of God who did not leave us comfortless or without hope. It is the authority of Jesus Christ, God made manifest, who conquered the Evil One, so that the confession of Jesus as the Holy One of God need not come just from the cowering fear of a fallen angel but from the lips of a believing child of God even as St. Peter confessed: LORD, TO WHOM SHALL WE GO? YOU HAVE THE WORDS OF ETERNAL LIFE AND WE HAVE BELIEVED AND HAVE COME TO KNOW THAT YOU ARE THE HOLY ONE OF GOD. And in a day and age when authority and power is often thought of in terms of military power or political majorities and finely tuned words, in a day when the world is looking for answers but may indeed be asking the wrong questions, we can be assured of the authority of Jesus Christ. The world needs to know it too. Trust in Him!

O Risen Christ, God's living Word,
To us, we pray, draw near.
Come, speak the truth that cleanses sin
With love that conquers fear.

Drive out the doubt that cripples faith;
Expel our pride and greed
That we, from powers that threaten us,
May, by Your grace, be freed.

(LSB 541 st.3-4)

In Jesus' Name. Amen.