

Epiphany 4 Mark 1:21-28

St. Mark's gospel is a book that feels like it was in a hurry, St. Mark was in a hurry to write things down pertaining to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the eye witnesses were being lost and a lasting account was needed. The pace of his gospel is staggering if you sit down and read it all in one go, and as it is only 16 chapters long it is perfectly possible to do that in less than 2 hours. Take this morning's reading, we are still in the first chapter, a mere 21 verses from the beginning and already we know that John the Baptist ministry was a preparation for Jesus' own, we have an account of Jesus' baptism by John and Jesus' subsequent time of temptation in the desert and Jesus has begun preaching and has called his first 4 disciples. By comparison, St Matthew's gospel takes until chapter 4 verse 23 to get us to the same point.

So this year B of the lectionary we can expect gospel readings that are succinct and specific, Mark didn't write things down to enhance the story, he didn't spend a lot of time referring back to prophecies, what we have in this account is the bare facts laid out for us to read and understand who Jesus is and what he means to us. The result of this style of writing is very exciting, it's fast paced, if it were a movie it would start action and be action, action, action all the way! It comes with a sense of urgency that can shake us into action ourselves and what we heard this morning is no exception.

The story is pretty unremarkable on the face of it, Jesus goes to preach at a synagogue, that seems natural for a Jewish holy man, but we know that Mark hasn't got time to write stuff down just to pad out his story, so why does he tell us this? Well, because people were amazed at his teaching, it would have been amazing enough to have a relatively young man come in and stand out as preacher of note among the established elders, priests, Pharisees and scribes but then Mark goes on to tell us that Jesus spoke with authority, not as the teachers of the law. So he wasn't just a naturally preacher, a great communicator, who did what the others did but better, he was different, he had authority.

Mark doesn't have time to tell us that people were waiting for this as a sign from God but our reading from Deuteronomy does, The Lord said "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him." This description of prophets to come could apply to any number of those inspired by God who spoke to the Jewish people, but in Jesus there is the ultimate prophet, the one who truly can speak authoritatively the words of God, because he is directly sent from God.

Then our gospel reading tells us of a man calling out to Jesus in the synagogue, he was possessed we are told by an evil spirit, he certainly seems to know that there is something different about Jesus, in fact he cries out exactly who he is, the Holy One of God. Jesus relieves the man of this spirit and what is most amazing is that the people remark not about the disruption in the synagogue not that there was a man shouting all sorts weird things about Jesus, not even that he was somehow miraculously healed of his affliction by a few words, but what they were astounded by was this show of authority that they had never seen before, not just authority of teaching, although that was worth another mention, but now authority through the action of healing this man. Then we are told that news of Jesus spread throughout the whole region.

In just 8 verses St Mark has set out Jesus' stall at the beginning of the gospel, Jesus the teacher who spoke in a way that no one had heard before, words that had confidence and authority, not words of belief in God or faith by discernment, but knowledge of God first hand and certainly of God's love and faithfulness to his people. And also Jesus the man of action who gets amongst the people and fixes what has gone wrong, heals them body, mind and

spirit and offers them a new way of being that means they have nothing to fear. St Mark's writings may not be the most beautifully crafted prose you've ever heard but they are effective at communicating God's message, Jesus is Lord, by God's authority.

It is by this authority that we can have confidence in our lives of faith and witness. We need not fear the distractions and difficulties of this world because we follow Jesus. Just like the early followers of Jesus in Corinth who ate meat at the market that had been ritually sacrificed to other Gods, we are not bound by the superstitions of others but rather we can be sure that there is only one God and the practices of those who would seek favour from others are simply a waste of time and effort. Paul reminds us that we have a responsibility not to lead others away from Jesus or confuse them by our example but he reminds us that our God is not simply the strongest or best of many Gods, but he is in fact God, the one and only, the other things in our lives that demand our attention and worship are not gods at all, simply false idols that we have built up for ourselves, that we think we can't do without, that we feel we must feed somehow to curry their favour.

The good news of Jesus is that we are free from all of that uncertainty of what must we do to stand out to God, to be special in his sight. Through Jesus we know that we are unique and loved by God, we need do nothing and indeed there is nothing we can do to make him love us more because he already loves us completely. In our uncertain lives in this uncertain world, we can be sure of this!