The Authority of Jesus
Mark 1:14-2:12

Someone has said that we are the most authority averse culture ever. For example, take expressive individualism: the idea that I get to decide who I am and that to be really me, to really live, I must express that to the world. Such a world-view views any authority external to itself as oppressive.

And yet, you don't have to be an expressive individualist to resent authority, do you? You've almost certainly experienced that rising resentment when someone else tells you what to do and you don't want to do it. And you find yourself thinking, 'who does he think he is?'

But imagine you're facing a problem, that you can't fix, but someone else, your boss, or your supervisor, can. And imagine they did. Imagine they went into bat for you - and talked to who ever needed talking to, or sorted what ever needed sorting. Then, you don't resent their authority, do you? You're thankful for it, for the way they've used their position, who they are, on your behalf.

But what about problems that go much deeper than that? Like damaged relationships, or a habit that's damaging you, and you can't break it; or the physical or psychological health of someone you love. What if someone could use their authority to fix that?

Well, we're looking at the gospel of Mark, and in today's passage we see Jesus doing just that. And as you watch *him* using his authority, Mark wants you to consider, *not* 'who does *he* think he is?' But 'who do *I* think he is?' And what's my response to who he is?

When Authority Speaks
Firstly, he has authority to teach
Look at v21: 'They went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching.' So far, so normal, no different from what might have been going on in any other synagogue that day. But then look at v22, 'They were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.'

And the scribes were respected religious leaders, who combined the roles of teacher, lawyer and moral ethicist. So these guys had a certain authority. And when they taught, they'd take the Old Testament law and explain it. But with Jesus, people are amazed for two reasons, v27: 'What is this? A new teaching with authority!'

So what Jesus was teaching was nothing like what they heard from the scribes - learned and authoritative though that was. It was new. And in v14-15 Mark gives us a taster: 'Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand."'

Now, imagine it's Saturday night and you've invited friends over to watch a film or a match on TV. And you're in the kitchen preparing some food, and someone calls from the lounge: 'it's starting!' You know what they mean, don't you? The thing you're all there for, the thing you've been waiting for, is beginning, so get out of the kitchen. And Jesus says, 'the time is fulfilled' because the thing they'd all been waiting for, the thing the Old Testament prophets had all been pointing to, has begun. It's happening, Jesus says. The kingdom of God is at hand. God's rule and reign - God's plan to right every wrong and redeem all creation - the end of the old and the beginning of the new - is beginning now.

A few years back we read a book as a family called ‘A Moment Comes’ and the blurb promised this was a story that builds to a great crescendo, when the moment comes and… it didn’t. And I turned the last page and read the last line, and we all looked at each other and went. Is that it? And since then we’ve renamed that book, ‘A Moment Didn’t Come.’

That wasn’t the impression Jesus left, was it? Because it wasn’t just that what he was saying was new. It was t*he way he was*. Verse 22 again, ‘he taught them as one who had authority.’

Now, you probably remember being in school and sat in a classroom with a teacher who wasn’t that great. Hopefully you also remember what it was to have a teacher who made their subject come alive. But the contrast these people in this synagogue are experiencing is much more profound, because it’s not that the scribes were bad teachers. It’s that they spoke as commentators on the text. But Jesus had authority, he spoke like the author of the text. And the implication is that *the* definitive moment in history has arrived because *he’s* arrived.

Now, if that was coming from anyone else, you’d either dismiss them as an egotistical narcissist, or have them interviewed by a psychiatrist. But somehow, with Jesus it’s different. One Jewish writer - who’s not a Christian - compares Jesus to other rabbis from around the same time. And he says others also had a sense of being in a special time in history, of having a divine calling - but with Jesus, he had this sense of being unique, of being highly self-aware of his authority, and yet you never get a sense of him creating a cult of personality around him. In fact, it’s the opposite. There’s a deep humility. There is, the writer said, no one like him in historic literature.

But what Mark wants you to see is that that goes for what Jesus did, as much as what he said.

Secondly, he has authority to free

Because while Jesus was teaching, a man with an unclean spirit cries out, v24, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” And that’s not so much a question as a statement: ‘We want nothing to do with *you*, Jesus of Nazareth. Go away!’ They have zero intention of letting this man go from their grip.

But notice how it refers to itself in the plural: what have you to do with *us*? Because it understands what someone with a ‘gentle Jesus meek and mild’ view of Jesus might not: that Jesus hasn’t just come to free *this* man but to disarm and dismantle the entire power structure of darkness. So, v24, ‘Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are - the Holy One of God.’

You probably know PT Barnum from the musical The Greatest Showman. And Barnum’s catchphrase was, ‘There’s no such thing as bad publicity.’ So why does Jesus silence the demon? I mean, the central question of this book is, ‘Who is this man?’ And the answer the unclean spirit gives is almost identical to the one Peter will give in chapter 8. So why rebuke the demon, v25, “Be silent, and come out of him!”? Why not welcome the publicity? Well, when later Jesus does say clearly who he is, he links it straight to the cross. Because you can’t understand who he is without understanding the cross.

But there’s another reason: you can have totally correct views about who Jesus is - just like this unclean spirit. You can know the truth. You can have your theology all lined up. But unless you trust that truth, unless you love the one the truth’s talking about, you’ve got a problem. As Martin Luther

said, ‘The life of Christianity exists in possessive pronouns.’ Because the demon might know Jesus is Saviour and Lord, but the heart of Christianity says, ‘he’s my saviour, he’s my Lord.’

And when it comes to the showdown, there is no contest. This is no nail biting gladiatorial fight - will Jesus or the demon triumph? Jesus simply shuts it up and kicks it out. Verse 26, ‘And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him.’ And a man once bound and controlled is free. Verse 27, "He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

Thirdly, he has authority to heal

And Peter’s mother-in-law is sick in bed, and v31, Jesus ‘came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her.’ Now if Jesus was a typical Greek or Roman healer he might have gone in there and said a spell or an incantation or two. But there’s nothing like that. He doesn’t even pray. It’s totally devoid of drama and theatrics. Jesus goes in, takes her by the hand and she’s healed. It’s as if Jesus and sickness can’t be in the same room.

Now, when you’ve been unwell for a bit - like with a fever - how do you feel after? Sometimes it can take a few hours, maybe even a few days before you’re feeling yourself again, can’t it. But here, Jesus enters, the fever leaves, and Peter’s mother-in-law gets up and v31, ‘she began to serve them.' It’s as if she goes, ‘O wow, I feel totally fine! Anyone want some tea?’ And Mark wants you to see, when Jesus heals, he heals completely.

And not just fevers. I don’t want to sound like a grumpy old man, but there’s a problem with modern medicine and that’s that doctors are becoming more and more sub-specialised and they’re experts in smaller and smaller areas - like your left big toe - they’re a big-toe-ologist. But look what Mark says about Jesus: ‘He healed many who were sick with *various* diseases.’ In other words, Jesus didn’t say, ‘got a fever? I can handle that, but heart-failure - oooh, I need to send you to my colleague.' Whoever with whatever they brought to Jesus went away healed.

And Mark wants you to ask, ‘who else do I know who can do that? Who else has that kind of authority?’

Fourthly, he has authority to cleanse

Verse 40, ‘A leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, “If you will, you can make me clean.”

Now, as one commentator says, leprosy wasn’t just a diagnosis it was a sentence. And to stop it spreading in the community, lepers were forced to live apart, in an endless isolation. Because it wasn’t just that you were sick, you were unclean. And the Old Testament laws on clean and unclean were designed to weave into Israel’s daily life an understanding that God was holy and we’re not, and to approach him we must be clean, but to enter his presence we must be holy.

And that meant if you were a leper you were, literally, an outsider. And you had to live outside, cut off from your family and friends.

Now, I don’t know how emotionally or psychologically draining you found lockdown, or isolation, but multiply that by the potentially endless shame and isolation a leper experienced. Of having people recoil from you. It’s no wonder writers of the time described lepers as ‘the living dead.’ So a leper didn’t just need healing, they needed cleansing.

Which is why this man comes the way he does: on his knees begging. He's desperate. But he's also doubting. But what does he doubt? It's not Jesus' ability, is it? He knows Jesus has the power to cleanse him, but does he have the will?

It doesn't take long to find out: verse 41, 'Moved with pity, [Jesus] stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean." Because Jesus doesn't just have authority, he has compassion. And instead of recoiling and retreating in horror, he reaches out and touches him.

Think about that. Jesus could have cleansed him just by willing it. He could have cleansed him just by saying the words. But he doesn't. He stretches out his hand and for the first time in however long this man feels someone touch him, and it's Jesus.

And the leprosy? Gone. Verse 42, 'Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.' So who has the authority, and the compassion, to make the unclean clean? Who can bring the outsider in? Jesus.

But fifthly, he has authority to forgive

And there are four friends who have another friend who's paralysed. And they know that if they can just get him to Jesus, Jesus will do the rest. But when they get him to where Jesus is they can't even get in the door. So what do they do? Somehow they get him up onto the flat roof and v4, 'They removed the roof above him'. Above Jesus. Who were these guys? Engineers. They must have been students at the local Capernaum School of Engineering. Because if an opening to Jesus can't be found, they're going to make one. And they lower him right in front of Jesus.

What is that? If you're American you'd say, 'that's bold!' If you're British you'll say, 'that's rude, they've just broken my roof.' But if you're Jesus, you say that's faith: because faith takes a problem that's bigger than us, and put's it in front of Jesus, knowing he'll do the rest.

Verse 5, 'When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."' And that's when the fun begins, because there are scribes there, and they hear that and start thinking, v7, "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone."

Now what would you think if, after the service, you and I are standing by your car in the car park chatting, and someone else reverses their car into your car and puts this massive dent in it, but I say to them, 'don't worry, no damage done, I forgive you, you don't need to pay anything', and he drove away happy. What would you be thinking as you stood there? 'Hang on, this is my car, it's for me to say if this is ok or not.'

And these scribes know that ultimately all sin is against God, so only God can say to this man, 'you're forgiven.' I mean, who does Jesus think he is?

But Jesus knows what they're thinking: v8-9, "Why do you question these things in your heart? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'?" It's a good question, isn't it? Because anyone could say, 'it's ok, your sins are forgiven' and no one would be any the wiser as to whether or not their sins really were forgiven. But to say, 'get up and walk' - everyone's going to know pretty quickly whether you have the power to do that

or not. And yet… to *really* forgive sins? If all sin is against God, then the scribes are right, who can do that but God alone?

Verse 10-12, “But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” - he said to the paralytic - “I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home.” And the man got up and walked out and everyone else is sat there open mouthed, because they’ve got an answer to the question, haven’t they: ‘who can forgive sins but God alone? Who can do what only God can do?’ Jesus.

What are you supposed to do with that?

When Authority Calls
Look again at the response Jesus called for in his teaching: v15, “Repent and believe in the gospel.”

You see, we all have a way of seeing the world. A way of judging our own actions and attitudes, of evaluating our motives and priorities. And Jesus is saying, you need to repent, you need to reorient the way you see life, the universe and everything, in line with me.

But you also need to believe. You need to move from this being an intellectual thing to a heart trust thing. And be able to say what the unclean spirit could never say: That Jesus coming as Saviour and Lord is good news, that he’s my saviour and Lord.

But then you need to do something else. You see, Jesus enters the world of Simon Peter and Andrew, the world of boats and nets and fish and sea, and says, v17: "Follow me”. And Mark says, v18, ‘Immediately they left their nets and followed him.’ And then he sees James and John mending their nets and Jesus calls them and, v20, ‘they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.’

And repenting and believing and following Jesus is not a one-off, been there, done that, got the t-shirt thing at the start of Christian life. It’s a get-out-of-bed-do-this-every-single-daything: to reorient my life around Christ, and trust him, and follow him and have him be the one who forms and shapes and disciples me. Not Netflix. Not whatever media I consume. But Christ. And like Peter and his friends that might mean giving stuff up. It might mean a change in how you relate to your career, or where you get your identity from, or re-evaluating your priorities or some key relationship.

You see, if you’re of a more conservative mindset you might think that what everyone really needs to do is is follow a set of rules - return to a traditional morality. And if you’re of a more liberal bent you might think that what everyone needs to do is follow their dreams, their own inner voice. But Jesus says, no, you both need to follow me.

But why should you do that?

When Our Hearts Respond
Firstly, because maybe you’re like this man oppressed by the unclean spirit. Not that you’re possessed by a demon, but that there can be things in our lives like wrong habits, or destructive behaviours, or patterns of thinking, that we just can’t get free from. And you discover you need an

authority, a power, greater than your will-power. And Jesus says: I'm that power, so come, follow me.

But to experience that power you've got to relinquish your own power, you've got to give up authority over your own life. And the reason you can do that, is that Christ gave up everything for you. And at the cross, he was plunged into the darkness to bring you into the light. But it's at the cross, Paul tells us, where these same dark powers tried to destroy Jesus, that Jesus made a public spectacle of them, and triumphed over them. And it's as you daily repent, and trust him, and follow him, that you'll know the freedom he's won for you.

But secondly, we can be like the leper. Not outwardly, but inwardly. Our sin stains us and leaves us feeling unclean, unworthy and outside. Because if people really knew what I was like they'd withdraw from me just like they withdrew from the leper. So, just like him, we need someone to cleanse us, and bring us back in.

But did you notice what happened when Jesus cleansed the leper? He went and told everyone what Jesus had done! And as a result, v45, 'Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, *but was out in desolate places*.' Can you see what's happened? It's as if he's changed places with the leper. Before, it was the leper who couldn't enter a town and was out in desolate places, but Jesus heals him and and now the leper can come in, and it's Jesus who's on the outside.

But that's the point of the gospel, isn't it. Because at the cross, Jesus takes the place of every leper. Of every sinner. Of you and me. And he takes our sin upon himself, and he's stained that we might be cleansed. He's cast out that we might be brought back in.

But finally, we can also be like the paralysed man - again, not outwardly, but inwardly. Stuff can happen, or we can fail in ways that leave us emotionally or spiritually paralysed and unable to move forward. And we're brought to an end of ourselves.

And when that's the case, like this man, you need friends to take you to Jesus. But more even than friends, you need Jesus. The Jesus who was made weak for you. The Jesus who was carried by his friends, not to a roof but a tomb. And he did it for you. And in his weakness you can find strength. in his death you can find life. In his resurrection you can find the power to walk again.

So, repent, believe and follow.