

## Authority & Power

*Mark 1: 21 -28*

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Reflecting on the theme for today captured in Mark's phrase that Jesus 'spoke with authority and not as the Scribes', I wondered when I last heard a word with authority. We have lived through another election campaign waiting in vain for a series of genuinely authoritative addresses from candidates. It is not that the speakers were bad people or even poor speakers, but where was the inspiration transporting a collection of words into something dynamic and arresting, integrated and visionary - words bearing the ring of truth and the force of logic? Authoritative words do not require a superb voice or brilliant articulation, although they are an obvious bonus. They do require a particular harmony of congruence, consistent with the speaker's life and values, accompanying a message of practical relevance, intelligent comprehensibility and inspirational vision.

Some of the world's greatest orators have been among its most tyrannical. See a newsreel of Adolf Hitler addressing a million people and you'll know his phenomenal ability to work a crowd and draw from them fanatical support for a despicable purpose.

Listen to Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' 'free at last' message in Washington to hear words of radically different empowering quality, seared into our minds as of truly authoritative character.

Nelson Mandela's inaugural presidential address captures a similar thread of authenticity.

Opponents rarely attack authoritative content but focus on the person with false distorting accusations.

If you've seen any of the US Republican candidates denouncing each other in the most vitriolic terms, deliberately misconstruing what the others are saying, you'll feel serious disquiet should any become President. Some traditions hold such awe for positions of authority that it is almost unthinkable to question the command of a person who is senior in status. Prince Charles, on being greeted by a New Zealander who simply walked up to him and shook his hand, declared –

'That's what I like about you Kiwis – you don't know your place!'

This was what so astonished the people around Jesus. He was simply a tradesman's son, low in status, his life programmed by his status at birth; certainly not permitted to speak to a wider public and even less likely on matters of faith. In a society where one's birth determined one's whole life Jesus' refusal to be bound by community expectations marked him as a rebel whose very survival depended on his ability to command authority and respect. The official rulers simply couldn't believe what they were seeing. They sought constantly to undermine him, to challenge him, to show him up for the ignoramus they thought he had to be. Not only did he refuse to 'know his place', he was drawing crowds of people who found him exhilarating and liberating. Jesus brought a wholeness that they did not find in the established systems and their front men. Jesus was a serious threat as he conveyed authority without position or power, without money or influential friends. He was not a spokesperson for a party or an interest group. He bore no charge or permission from the established authorities. How dare this imposter step so far from his ordained lowly place; how dare he be so effective; by what right did he speak with such empowering authority that was so attractive to everyone else? Did he not know his place or was he deliberately stepping outside it?

'Knowing our place' is not a Kiwi tradition and a good thing too. However fondly we fall in love with Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters or even the characters of Downton Abbey. Authority in these sagas had everything to do with place and power. Much of the underlying wealth was gained from the almost powerless lives of the labouring or slave classes. True authority has to do with quality, integrity and love. Power – while it can be benevolent – frequently means position with exploitation by fear imposed to ensure compliance with orders. The authority of William Wilberforce, fighting 20 years to outlaw slavery, was centred in the absolute justice of his cause. His devastating logic and his appeal to essential Christian values took all that time to bear fruit not because Parliament disagreed with the ethics of the case, but because so many members had so much money tied up in cotton, sugar, salt, corn, tropical fruits and other commodities where very low-paid workers and slaves guaranteed the massive profits being made on their substantial investments.

Wilberforce was less authoritative when he debated with Charles Darwin on the issues of evolution. He did not see that science is not in conflict with Scripture or that Darwin was describing a process of development not challenging the Creator, so although Wilberforce spoke with his customary eloquence he lost the debate on logical grounds through trying to defend what God hadn't said.

The conflict between the forces of oppressive power and Christian humanitarian values continues in our time where investment in weaponry, tobacco, liquor, loan sharking and polluting industries continues to provide sure-fire returns exploiting the weaknesses and desperation of the vulnerable above more ethical options. The world is in serious financial difficulty right now because so many leaders were blatantly dishonest and too often, with governmental connivance, degradingly exploitative. While they rode the bubble they spoke repeatedly with confident assurance even when knowing they were lying. Yet, right through, wise heads were calling with prophetic voices for a greater accountability which went largely unheeded, ultimately costing 37 million people their livelihoods and 300,000 people their homes. One of the surest measures of authority is integrity with transparency.

The factors that made Jesus' words so different from other forms of authority are profoundly significant. The Roman conquerors had supreme power enforceable by the sword. They exercised it brutally wherever they saw a challenge to it; the authority of power, control, enforcement with fear. The Sadducees at the Temple in Jerusalem linked in with the Roman authorities combining Caesar's power with their spiritual responsibilities, creating an unholy alliance. Wherever the Church has become a partner with oppressive force its own authority has been corrupted, too often leading the exploited to believe that their poverty of circumstance and spirit are God's will for them – the ultimate sacrilege leadership can commit.

The Scribes' and Pharisees' power lay with their interpretations and additions to the Laws of Moses. The Law became corrupted by ecclesiastical lawyers whose power over the common people was almost absolute. There are but ten Commandments with 600 related biblical laws. There were thousands of miniscule applications by Jesus' time which rendered ordinary people powerless.

Jesus bypassed the circumscriptions of the Scribes and the seductions of the Sadducees; he refused to fear the Pharisees and largely ignored the Roman conquerors, responding instead to the real needs of people to know the love of God, not fear of the law and its crippling army of enforcers.

Jesus demonstrated authority as that which enhanced the freedom and humanity of everyday people. He moved the faith from shoulds, musts, oughts and don'ts on a lengthy list of rules, offering instead a loving relationship with the living God supported by a new vision of freedom; freedom from fear and superstitions, freedom from religiosity and bondage to legalistic religion. Jesus enjoyed himself immensely bringing light, life, laughter and love to the wonders of faith in God.

The Scribes' and Pharisees' power was in their knowledge of the Law and its abuse among those less educated. They used it to 'bind people with burdens too heavy to bear, while they would not lift a finger to help'. Jesus observed that they fussed over the minutiae of a legal point yet failed to pursue the weightier issues of justice and grace.

There is a simple way to measure and assess words of authority and that is to ask whether or not they empower and encourage us. Do they lift us up and affirm our worth as people created in God's image? Where the words are challenging do they appeal to us as fair and reasonable even where sacrifices are called for? Do they show us an end goal worthy of what we may be called to give? Is there an obvious integrity, no soft-peddling of hard truths or glorifying beyond reason the expected outcome?

The use of flattery and unrealistic promises is not just poor leadership, but it's an assumption that they believe that we're idiot enough to swallow such sugar-coated rhetoric. We all hate 'spin' because it is demeaning and undermining of our very humanity. If it's blood, toil, tears and sweat that are ahead of us, we should be told so honestly.

What of the Scriptures as bearing God's authority?

The Bible has been used as everything from a battering ram to wreck people's lives to a doorstop by those who never open it. Some folk adopt a belief that every word in it (preferably in the King James' Version) is God-breathed and represents God's thoughts on every subject. They still manage to fiercely disagree on what God means, resulting in a vast array of absolute fundamentalist yet differing points of view. These folk mistake dogmatic absolutism for authority when it is, in fact, the very opposite. Authority in the Bible comes in the same way as it comes to any other literature – by the way in which we have an almost instinctive recognition of the truth of what we read.

When Paul declared 'there is nothing in death or life, in the world as it is or in the world as it shall be, there is nothing in all creation that shall separate us from the love of God', do we not recognize its magnificent sublime authority? In a world where we hear increasingly of Karma or Feng Shui, or 'what goes around comes around' or 'a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do' as life philosophies, we need bear no shame in offering the loving grace of God as the foundation of a unifying rationale for an integrated life. Your horoscope may be fun to read – and if you don't like one you can always find a variant of it, but it is more horror than scope and as a source of authoritative living it's a dismal failure.

For an ethical example of authority in action we note Jesus telling his followers 'do not say "an eye for an eye" but rather "love your enemies"', offering us the vastly better Christian option reiterated by Paul. 'Never return evil for evil but overcome evil with good.' To love an enemy is not to approve their attitude or actions, but to pray for the transformation of life they need and for you to be released from their power to continue to hurt you.

When we read of God declaring 'Let us create people in our own image and after our likeness' do we not see our origin as men, women and children of all races and peoples equally formed in the image of God? God goes on to declare 'I have loved you with an everlasting love' or in the words of Jesus 'I will never leave you or forsake you' 'Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you' 'Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid' 'Perfect love casts out fear' – even the perfect love is not our own but God's gift to us. For further guidance in ethical conduct the Bible doesn't provide a list of rules to obey, but a set of gifts and graces to enable loving relationships which we receive, live and share. We adopt patterns of behaviour to enhance and develop these relationships, as they will provide us with both friendships and friendly relationships with everyone from our checkout operators to the cafe attendant and of course the Vicar. We in turn become nice people to know, reliably consistent. Of course we are all works in progress, paintings being worked over, stories being revised and refined – that's the beauty of grace. One of the delights of divine authority is that it isn't the kind that stands over us with some fierce spiritual whip or the ultimate in surveillance cameras. There's a refreshing liberty in God's authority. It's why Jesus said to his people 'I no longer call you servants, but friends'.

The idea of God as a friend is profoundly beautiful. A true friend is one we can run to, who will listen no matter what drivel we utter, who will give us a hug if we need it and perhaps a sharp word to bring us to our senses. So God's authority is less likely to be a voice from the heavens than an embrace from a friend. Less a voice dictating directions than a word of common sense assuring us that we are people gifted with God's presence, free to make our own way upon the earth with the comfort of knowing that God will always be with us, whatever happens.

A final example of the difference between oppressive power and liberating authority.

Remember the young man whose moral authority confronted the state's power in the tank that threatened to run him over in Tiananmen Square. His courage inspired the tank driver to refrain from exercising the State's power making him the unsung moral hero of that confrontation by choosing the morality of liberating authority over the power of official oppression.

If you listen for the word of the Lord it is most likely to be heard from those who love you, who have your interests at heart and perhaps even more so from within yourself guided by those principles of grace that guided Jesus and the many people since whose lives have contributed to the sum of authoritative human experience. You can find God's word anywhere, certainly in the Bible – that great treasure-store wherein God's word is sourced - or the words of a hymn or the liturgy of the Church – even in a novel or in a wry

slogan on a bus. There's no reason why you shouldn't hear it from a politician, business, church or other community leader, or even from yourself!

May God be to us all an empowering authority who enhances our freedom to be our own people, and from that liberty enables us to receive and to give as we will, satisfying our own and others' needs, envisioning our future, affirming the beauty of each other in the awesome reality of shared grace and wondrous gifts with which to celebrate the sheer joy of life in all its glory.

God the authoritative Word called creation to life; Christ the authoritative Word gifted redemption to creation; Spirit the authoritative Word gives us authority to live forever as the people of God.