

SERMON FOR SUNDAY 4B
ALL SAINTS BIRKENEHAD
THE REVEREND JORDAN GREATBATCH

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

Authority is something that has been a hot topic this past year. The idea of experts and their authority has come to the fore due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We have put our trust in experts and their authority. Though some have questioned it. The pandemic has raised all sorts of issues around science, trusting experts and how we as a society follow their advice. This is also true in the Church.

Every year myself and 2 representatives head of to what is called the Diocesan Synod. It is in sense a conference where all the clergy and lay representatives gather together to discuss and debate the issues that arise in the church. Sometimes there is interesting debate on contentious topics. But most of the time it is dealing with bits of legislation that govern the life of the Church.

In a way it is like the state. Both Church and State have rules and regulations which we live by. The rules and regulations are supposed to be designed to make

living together possible. They preserve order and stability so we can live in security and peace. If we are to live in safety then obeying the rules and regulations is necessary. We also invest certain people with the authority to administer the rules on our behalf. In the church our local rules for this Diocese are called Statutes. The church's rules for the whole country are called canons.

The administering of these rules is vested in our synods, our clergy and our vestries and councils.

2

Fortunately situations of people disobeying the rules don't happen very often. When they do happen usually a simple appeal to the rules is usually enough to bring about obedience to authority. But the machinery is there to enable our authority to be used to maintain the stability of the Christian community.

That sort of authority is not popular today. I'm not sure it's the best way of solving differences either. Sometimes it's the only way left. But there is another sort of authority. This authority is one we will obey more readily than that which simply appeals to rules.

In our community there are some people who are considered experts in their field. Through training and experience they have gained a knowledge and insight which others don't have. For instance, when the mechanic who fixes my car tells me there's a hole in the exhaust I'm inclined to believe him. I believe him because I give him authority.

3

I give him authority because of his specialized knowledge which I don't have. If a friend who knows as little as I do about cars tells me the same thing I'm less inclined to believe him. I don't believe him because I don't think he speaks with authority. This sort of authority is one we are less inclined to question because we rely on someone else's experience and knowledge, which we don't possess.

Jesus was one who taught with authority. His authority was not the rules kind, but the knowledge kind. It was an authority which made a deep impression on his hearers. In this story Mark doesn't tell us the substance of Jesus teaching. He doesn't relate what Jesus was saying. Mark seems more interested in the manner and the effect of the teaching than in its substance. Clearly it was teaching

with authority and this authority made an impression on his hearers.

4

Another strange thing about this story is that Mark doesn't tell us anything about the man with the unclean spirit. There is no indication of his family, his faith or lack of, his occupation, his place of residence. Jesus conversation is with the spirit and his action is on the spirit. Once the exorcism is over the man is not even mentioned. Even the exorcism is passed over very quickly. It is not the man, nor is it the exorcism that Mark wants us to concentrate on. It's as if he is saying, "Look at the teaching of Jesus. Who is this who speaks with authority? Where does his power come from?" Jesus power over the unclean spirits reinforces the earlier judgment that his teaching is authoritative. Words and actions agree. What Jesus says is what he does. There is something authentic about this person.

5

Those who saw Jesus clearly saw something greater than the Scribes. They were considered the highest authority. But something greater was present. In

Jesus there was an integrity not seen in the scribes who we can only assume said one thing and did another. It's what we call hypocrisy. This was not to be found in Jesus and this was an aspect of his power. It is strange that in this story it's the unclean spirit who knows who Jesus is. "I know who you are" it says, "the holy one of God." St Mark is at pains to point out in the rest of the gospel that Jesus is the messiah, the holy one of God.

It is from this belief in Jesus as messiah that we get our authority. It does not rest in anything else but him. So we have to keep coming back to the scriptures to try and find out how to live with the same values. That is why we attend church each Sunday. To constantly remind ourselves that we the church are the body of Christ. We are Christ's body and we do his work. We are to do it with the same authority. An authority which comes from knowledge and experience. An authority which shows that words and actions agree.

6

Here in this Eucharist we submit to the authority of the Jesus we know. We receive his life that we may be transformed to be more like him. So we seek his presence that we may be his presence. For this not

merely a meal, if it was we would not gather in a special way to receive it. Something happens when we pray over the gifts of bread and wine, they are changed, and by us receiving it, we are changed. For this is what happens when you encounter Jesus. Like the man with the unclean spirit, one is changed. Let us be changed, and let us be encouraged that Gods authority rests on us to be agents of change in our world, through his power, and his spirit. Amen.