

Sermon for 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Epiphany 28<sup>th</sup> January 2024 at Grenoble.

Readings: Deuteronomy 18 v15-20 and Mark 1 v21-2

Be amazed.

Do you remember any of the names of your teachers from when you were at school? For some of us, that was a long time ago!

You may remember some because they were bad teachers or unkind, but for now concentrate on the good ones.

I remember Miss Woodruff and Mr Sampson and Miss Howard....

Shout out some names you remember.....

Think of the teacher you remember best because of the influence they had on you. The one who really inspired you.

(Ask someone) What was it that made them memorable? Did they have a particular teaching style that worked for you? Were they very strict? Or very lenient? Did they speak with an authority that made you want to listen to them? They were probably someone who really knew what they were talking about and brought their subject to life.

Why do you think that you still remember them all these years later? What was special about them? Just think about it for a moment or two.

We are back with Mark's gospel today and he shows clearly that Jesus was a good teacher. The writer frequently tells us that when Jesus was teaching the people were **amazed** by it. Our reading today included the word 'amazed' twice in just six verses.

And they also noted that he spoke 'as one with authority'.

Yet, interestingly, Mark tells us very little of what Jesus actually **said**. Do you remember we said a few weeks ago that Mark is the shortest of the four gospels. It is a short, fascinating and fast-moving story and therefore a bit short on detail.

For anyone wanting to know more about Jesus, inviting them to read the book of Mark is a good place to start.

Because it is short on narrative, we have to look carefully for clues along the way as to what Jesus was actually saying and we get some of those clues in the passage we just heard. The people conclude that Jesus is an awesome person.

The people are amazed at his **teaching** and then he sets a man free from the grip of evil and people are even more amazed. We are seeing education in action; not just words but deeds. What Jesus **does** is a sign of who he **is** and what he's been saying, and when the people see it happening in practice, they recognise it as more than mere words. He is teaching 'with authority'. He is practising what he preaches.

First, the people are astounded because Jesus taught them as one having authority. Jesus was speaking his own words whereas the Rabbis of the time would have taught by referring back to earlier authorities as we do today when we quote from the great theologians of the past. The Rabbis would teach by helping the people to apply the law of Moses to their daily lives and would present the words of authoritative teachers who had gone before them.

It seems that that was not Jesus' way of teaching. He spoke with the authority of one who was close to God.

Throughout this Gospel we will see that Mark portrays Jesus unique relationship with God and how that raised questions in the minds of those around him.

People with an unclean spirit would not have been allowed in the synagogue, so the symptoms of the man's sickness were probably not always obvious. However, on being confronted by Jesus, the demon is dramatically exposed. The demon tries to protect itself from Jesus by asking 'What do you want from us'? In other words 'keep away from us. Back off!'

Jesus retaliates with the command 'Be quiet and come out of him'. Here, in this story, we have the proof that Jesus (and God) are stronger than evil and then the demon leaves the poor man with one last act of violence.

Some of us may be a little uncertain about this idea of evil spirits, but we can all recognise the presence and persistence of evil in our world in

various disguises. And, as I have said, the good news here is that Jesus demonstrated he has the power to overcome the forces of evil, wherever we may encounter them.

Jesus had authority from his father and the truth of what he said was self-evident. Jesus knew who he was and he was confident in his identity. It had been confirmed at his baptism. Do you remember how he saw the heavens open and a dove descended and God said to him 'you are my son whom I love; with you I am well pleased'.

After Jesus had healed this man with the unclean spirit, the issue of authority comes up again. The people notice that as well as Jesus himself having authority, his teaching also has authority.

For they say 'What is this? A new teaching – and with authority'. Once again they were amazed – not just by his actions but by his words. He was an awesome teacher.

When Jesus speaks, things happen. There is authority in what he says. His words have an immediate impact in front of their eyes – the man is healed. His message is a message of freedom from oppression and his words have authority for that to happen. The man is liberated from what has prevented him living a full life.

Jesus walks his talk!

We are still in the season of Epiphany – this is the 4<sup>th</sup> and last Sunday of that season. So when exploring the readings for today we may need to remind ourselves about what Epiphany means. It means a sudden revelation or realisation of something. What I described a couple of weeks ago as an 'Aha' moment.

So just to quickly summarise the last few Sundays:

On the first Sunday of Epiphany, we looked at the story of Jesus baptism, when the Holy Spirit revealed that Jesus was, indeed the son of God.

On the second Sunday of Epiphany we heard about Jesus choosing his first disciples and it was revealed how he can 'see' each of us as we really are and let us know that we are loved by God despite and because of who we are.

Then we looked at the revelation of the first of Jesus signs and wonders, the miracle performed at the wedding in Cana.

And today we have the revelation of Jesus' first act first healing and of his authority, as told in Mark's gospel.

However, Epiphany is not just about acknowledging Jesus' greatness in the past; it is also about discovering what deserves our amazement in our current experiences.

The thing is, however, that we Christians go to church, each week (or so) and we trust that God will be present here by the Holy Spirit.

But do we expect that this living presence of Almighty God will shake us up, and cause amazement among us at his presence in our midst?

Are we amazed by what Jesus did in the past? And are we ready to acknowledge that he still does amazing things now and expect that Jesus will do more amazing things in the future?

Jesus revealed a boundary-breaking God. With each and every boundary that we put in to place, God is able to break through and amaze us. Nothing is impossible for God.

As with all the themes we have looked at during Epiphany we have to decide what our response will be to what we have seen, heard and learnt.

The Jesus we worship is amazing and awesome; what should our response be? Are we ready to follow this teacher and master as we travel through our lives?

The onlookers in his day acknowledged that he spoke and acted with authority. They were amazed by it. Believing in Jesus should make a difference to our lives from Monday to Saturday as well as on a Sunday. It should colour every part of our lives; the things we do, the invitations we accept, the social media with which we interact, the things we say to others, the examples we set by the way we live our lives.

Jesus, later on in Mark, tells the teachers of the Law that the two greatest commandments are 'to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. And to love your neighbour as yourself.'

Living by those, the greatest of commandments, with all that entails, is the only response possible when we acknowledge that we have an amazing and awesome Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

We are now going to sing 'What a beautiful name' and as we do so, let's sing it prayerfully, reflecting on our own response to our amazing Lord and Saviour.

"What a powerful name it is, the name of Jesus Christ my King

Nothing can stand against the name of Jesus.

What a beautiful name."

Amen.

