

Title: The One Authority – the Only Authority – Jesus the Christ

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, your son came to redeem the world; he set himself above human authority and the powers evil; may his authority empower us to change the world, setting aside our preconceived notions, transforming them into gospel notions, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

“For centuries people believed that Aristotle was right when he said that the heavier an object, the faster it would fall to earth. Aristotle was regarded as the greatest thinker of all time, and surely he would not be wrong. Anyone, of course, could have taken two objects, one heavy and one light, and dropped them from a great height to see whether or not the heavier object landed first. But no one did until nearly 2,000 years after Aristotle’s death.

“Legend has it that in 1589 Galileo summoned learned professors to the base of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Then he went to the top and pushed off a ten-pound and a one-pound weight. Both landed at the same instant. The power of belief was so strong, however, that the professors denied their eyesight. They continued to say Aristotle was right.

“I believe that this illustrates perfectly what is going on in the world today. You could show the terrible ravaging effects of AIDS and people will have promiscuous sex anyway. You can show someone a diseased liver and cancerous lung and people are going to abuse alcohol and smoke regardless of the facts.

“You know what I wish? I wish someone would just climb to the top of the tower and push off a ten-pound argument and a one-pound argument and let’s just see if they reach the ground first. That would finally prove who is right and who is wrong. But then I am reminded that when Galileo did that no one believed him. Even with the authority of obvious visible proof, (that is) the two weights reach(ing) the ground at the same time, the professors did not believe. The problem here is obvious. Most people are going to believe what they have always believed regardless of the facts.

“But something different occurred in the life of Jesus. Something persuasive. Mark records that when Jesus came to Capernaum, on the Sabbath day, and

entered the synagogue and taught, the crowds were astounded. Why? One word: Authority.” (Unknown)

Ultimate authority is found in Jesus’ commands.

Our readings from Sunday to Sunday get plucked out of scripture without us immediately knowing what was going on when the story begins – like today’s gospel. It begins, “They went to Capernaum.” Who are “they?” Well, if you remember from last Sunday, Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James, and John to follow him. They are “they.”

Capernaum was a town on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. Peter and Andrew lived there. James and John probably also lived there. There is a church over the site believed to be Peter’s home. The floor is transparent to see the excavation of Peter’s house below. Being rejected by his family and friends at Nazareth, Jesus makes Capernaum his new hometown.

The Sabbath comes and Jesus goes to synagogue. It’s a simple statement meant to tell us that Jesus was an observant Jew who worshipped regularly. We are also told that Jesus taught. Though not Capernaum’s rabbi, Jesus assumes the role. It could very well be that the people of Capernaum were unable to support a full-time rabbi.

Lately, I have been contemplating what it must have been like to meet Jesus. Jesus arrives in Capernaum as a stranger. It is possible they had heard of what happened at Nazareth. Yet Jesus is allowed to teach in their synagogue! He must have had a very powerful presence. Jesus’ authority comes from God as was mentioned in the Old Testament reading, that a true prophet “will speak in my [God’s] name” (Deuteronomy 18:19).

They were astounded at his teaching. Obviously, it was not something they expected. Why? Because he taught with a personal authority, not like the scribes. They never heard someone teach with personal authority before. The scribes were the ones learned in the Law of Moses. They were the experts. But their authority did not come from their knowledge, it came from the written Law of Moses. They were teachers and interpreters. Jesus was superseding the authority of the Law of Moses. This is what got him in trouble in Nazareth.

All things being equal, there were probably some there that wanted to kick Jesus out, at the least. Perhaps, even bodily harm. Just as Jesus was in jeopardy, a man with an unclean spirit walks into the synagogue – almost on cue.

Having been tempted by Satan in the wilderness, Jesus is now confronted by an unclean spirit, lending further evidence that Mark characterizes Jesus' ministry as warfare with the power of evil. The spirit's intent was to out Jesus.

He names Jesus. He is there to call out Jesus. It is almost like a scene out of a spaghetti western. He thinks that the world revolves around him and the only reason Jesus is there is to get him. By referring to himself as "us," the demon is speaking for the fraternity of demons. Then he yells out Jesus' secret identity, "You are the Holy One of God." This could mean a lot of things, but certainly gives Jesus a good title.

Well Jesus goes to great lengths in Mark's gospel to keep his secret identity a secret. The unclean spirit challenges Jesus with the revelation. Jesus responds to try to keep the secret and orders the unclean spirit out of the man. And it did!

The man went into spasms and then the spirit with a loud noise came out of the man. Needless to say, the congregation was taken by surprise. You just don't see that every time you go to church – at least not in the Episcopal Church.

Anyone who thought that Jesus was dangerous to the Law of Moses before, must have been utterly dumbfounded then. They never saw anything like that before. They probably put up with the man before. "Oh, here comes Charlie. Just humor him and maybe he'll go away."

Jesus brings a new teaching, with a new authority, and he successfully commands unclean spirits. Jesus must be a keeper.

There is another problem Jesus created for himself. It is the Sabbath. Jesus worked by ordering the unclean spirit out of the man. Jesus breaks the Law of Moses. Jesus breaks the Ten Commandments. Yet, instead of riding Jesus

out on a rail, they accept Jesus' teaching as a new teaching with authority. They overlook the violation of the law.

This sets the stage for Jesus' ministry in the Galilee region. He performs miracles and his teaching supersedes the Law of Moses. So, Jesus becomes the religious authority and the Law of Moses and the Ten Commandments take a back seat. This also creates the problem that the religious authorities cannot let stand. They will have to do away with Jesus. They failed to recognize that ultimate authority is found in Jesus' commands.

“As opposed to those who, inside or outside official institutions, set themselves up as God’s spokespersons, the text from the Gospel underlines Jesus’ authority. To what extent do you accept other ‘authorities’ in your life, as if they were more important than his? From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus heals the sick and sets free those oppressed by evil forces. Are you aware that you, too, have been entrusted with the mission of healing others and setting them free? In what ways do you cooperate to create a healthier and freer world?”¹

Text: **Mark 1:21–28** (NRSV)

²¹ They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²² They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴ and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He^m commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” ²⁸ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. ²

¹ Reflections written by Rev. Fr. Mariano Perrón Director of Inter-Religious Affairs Archdiocese of Madrid, Spain

^m Or *A new teaching! With authority he*

² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 1:21–28). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.