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Sermon

Epiphany –Revealing Christ's Authority

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28

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On this last Sunday of Epiphany, the story of the revealing of Christ continues. We have followed the stepping stones as first the wise men came from the East to worship the newborn king, then Simeon and Anna in the temple recognised in this baby the longed-for Messiah. We leapt on 30 years to John announcing the Messiah and baptising Jesus in what might be seen as the ceremonial washing of a high priest and simultaneously the sacrificial lamb of God. Then there was the voice from heaven announcing that he is the Son of God. We listened in on the call of the disciples and the revelation to Nathaniel that Jesus was the Son of God and King of Israel. Last week we heard a radical call to discipleship as Simon, Andrew, James and John left their boats and followed him to become fishers of men.

Today, the revelation continues as Jesus starts to teach and act. The people realise that this man is different. He has an authority such as they had not seen before. As Mark presents the story, his identity is still secret. The people don't know who Jesus is – it is the spirit world which recognises him first.

The Old Testament passage cues us into the expectation held by the Israelites that God would send "the Prophet" who would be like Moses and speak with great authority.

The context of the passage is a warning not to seek revelation from the occult. God's people are not to try to gain knowledge from spiritual sources other than God.

"Let no-one be found among you who ... practises divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD..."¹

It is a strong warning because these ways of seeking spiritual revelation are not connecting to God but to dangerous alternatives. Channelling demons or (supposedly) the dead is a sure route to deception. Do you remember Jesus called Satan a liar from the beginning and the father of lies? If you communicate with the realm of lies – you have to expect to be deceived.

¹ Deuteronomy 18:10-12

Divination is a broad term covering attempts to discern spiritual meaning by various occult means: such as interpreting omens – big business in the ancient world and today in parts of the world, horoscopes, reading tea leaves, and countless other systems people have devised.

Now you may say, surely no one believes in that stuff! Yet there was a clairvoyant shop in the local plaza a couple of years ago and there are professional mediums on TV and radio. Why? Because people turn to them. I remember a computer programmer colleague who became engrossed with I-Ching, a Chinese practice which in essence produces a reference into a book of sayings which are taken to significant for one's decisions and life direction. My question to him (as a logical man) was: either today's reference is random or if it is significant there must be some intelligence behind it. If it is random why would you trust it? If it is not – don't you want to know what the intelligence is that you are following?

God warned his people then and his warning stands: have nothing to do with sorcery or divination. However, he does want them and us to seek him who is Truth.

The reading tells of an authoritative prophet who would come sometime after Moses. Moses has spoken with great authority out of his relationship with God. In Numbers 12:5-8, God appeared in a pillar of cloud and rebuked Aaron and Miriam (Moses' brother and sister) for speaking against Moses. He said that he communicated with other prophets in visions, dreams and riddles, but with Moses he appeared and spoke face to face. Moses was granted a significantly higher level of revelation and clarity than others.

Much of what is said about the coming prophet is generally true of godly Old Testament prophets: Those whom God was inspiring were to be listened to. God would inspire them with his good messages to his people and he expected his people to pay attention and obey.

But, he would hold to account any whom presumed to be a prophet without being called by God. There is a principle here for us today. I am one of the examining chaplains the Bishop asks to interview potential candidates for ordination. Each year, I interview one or two people as part of a larger discernment process. Amongst other things I look for a healthy relationship with God through Jesus and that the individual and has clear guidance that God is calling them to ministry which can be confirmed by the Church too. We should not be presumptuous in advancing ourselves for church leadership.

Now although, what is said here can be seen as generally true of Old Testament prophets, there is a promise of a special one.

Verse 18: I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth.

This was understood to be fulfilled in the Messiah. That's why John the Baptist was asked, "Who are you? Are you the Prophet?"² Was he this prophet of Deuteronomy 18. His answer was, "No."

In the gospel reading Jesus teaches in the synagogue and people are amazed. He taught with an authority they had not heard before. Moses had authority from standing before God and encountering him face to face. Jesus speaks with even greater authority than Moses as he calmly reinterprets the Law of Moses: you have heard it said, but I say to you....³

They were used to the Rabbis teaching as they still do, saying: What does this mean? Well Rabbi so and so understood it like this and Rabbi argued thus and so. It sounds like our legal system of precedents doesn't it? But Jesus just declared what was so. He had authority of himself. He was the Prophet they had waited

² John 1:21

³ Sermon on the Mount – Matthew 5ff

for. Even as a boy of twelve in Jerusalem he had sat with the teachers of the Law in the temple courts, listening to them and asking them questions and “everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.”⁴

And so in Capernaum, they marvelled at his words – here was a village tradesman who spoke with such authority. Bishop Peter Carrell helpfully points out that the word for authority can also mean supernatural power. And this is the next part of the manifestation: they see his authority over the spiritual realm.

A man, Mark tells us, “with an unclean spirit” disrupts the meeting calling out against Jesus. I wonder how you react to that? The New Testament takes the existence of demons for granted, but most in the Western world would view it as bizarre, primitive, ridiculous. Modern scientific attitudes heavily influence us and since nothing of the supernatural can be detected by scientific means, we dismiss it all as a primitive superstition. We would be happier if Mark had told us the man had Tourette’s syndrome or was psychotic. On the other hand there are those who brand everything they don’t understand as demonic.

C.S. Lewis wrote in the introduction to “The Screwtape Letters”,

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.⁵

I once was in the former camp of disbelief, but sheer experience has taught me to take seriously the Bible’s view of the supernatural. I have encountered people struggling with powers beyond themselves which have resolved when treated as an entity and told to leave.

In 2015, Anne, Lindy, Helen and I were on team together in Africa. We were in a village church praying for all who wanted to be filled with the Holy Spirit. As we went along the rows of people they received quietly without any particular sign of being affected, until someone prayed for a woman who collapsed on the floor making strange noises. It became clear that something in her was resisting the presence of the Holy Spirit. Later, Anne and Helen with Peter Akester and the local pastor counselled and prayed with her to find the roots of the oppression in her life. As they helped her deal with sins, unforgiveness and curses she was spontaneously delivered of the unclean spirits without drama and also healed of various pains: stomach, back, head and chest.

Sometimes there is a more or less of a struggle, sometimes it is imperceptible except that the person has a sense of freedom. Back in the 1990s, I used to struggle with persistent thoughts that if I prayed for someone they would not be healed. “Just as well, Helen is here - if it were just me nothing would happen.” After some years of that, I prayed that I shouldn’t have to struggle with this fog of doubt. The idea came to me to name it as: doubt, scepticism and unbelief. And then I wondered if they might be spiritual powers. So I told them to go in Jesus’ name and the oppressive thoughts lifted. I don’t mean I never doubted again, but I didn’t have to struggle through a barrage of negative thoughts when approaching a healing prayer engagement. But the reason for telling you is that it was no more dramatic than shoo-ing a fly away with a wave of the hand.

I not talking about this to frighten you. However, we have to be realistic. When you are in a battle, it is foolish to wander around smelling the daisies, ignoring the soldiers firing at you. Happily, most of the time if we stay inside the boundaries God has given us in the Bible, we are kept from harm. That is a good reason for the instructions about divination we heard from Deuteronomy – they are rules to protect us for deception and oppression.

It was when we prayed for the Holy Spirit to come on the African woman that she reacted. It was when Jesus the Son of God acting in the power of the Holy Spirit was speaking in the synagogue that the unclean spirit challenged Jesus. It recognised him for who he was, even when no one else did. But Jesus would not accept

⁴ Luke 2:46-47

⁵ C. S. Lewis (2009). “The Screwtape Letters: Letters from a Senior to a Junior Devil”, p.8, HarperCollins UK

that testimony. There is no partnership between holiness and evil. No, he simply ordered the spirit to be muzzled and to leave the man. With a struggle it did. It convulsed the man and after calling out with a loud voice, it left him.

The people were already amazed at the authority of his teaching, now they are even more amazed at his spiritual authority. He simply commanded and the demon left!

We can give Mark credit that he does not lump all ailments into the demonic category. Later in this chapter in verses 32-34, for example, he refers to the sick and the demonised as separate categories.

I said I don't want to frighten you. If you are a Christian you have been given authority by Jesus over unclean spirits. That is part of our commission. When he sent his disciples out on their mission trips he told them they had power and authority to drive out demons and to cure diseases.⁶ When the seventy-two returned, they exclaimed that the demons submitted to them in his name. He replied, in Luke 10:18,

"I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions (metaphors for demons) and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

So our focus is not on deliverance and the demonic but on Jesus. Like them when it needs dealing with we attend to it. We don't need to be scared although it is only natural to be nervous of something new and outside your experience.

We have been allowed to look over the disciples' shoulders as they watched Jesus amazed. Somehow this village tradesman was teaching with great personal authority and when challenged by the fearful hidden power of darkness, he simply used authority to tell it to go. The question was starting to form – who is this man?

Maybe as we have covered this ground: the occult, obedience to God, not going into areas God warns us off, Jesus' authority in word and action, my saying there are unclean spirits which afflict people, our having authority as Christians over those entities – maybe you are troubled by some aspect or feel you need to clear something up. I will be available afterwards to talk if you want that. Or you may want to speak to Helen, Anne, Peter or Lorraine who could help you as well.

It may also be a prompt to go on the Alpha course we are running from 18th February, where there is time to discuss and explore questions of faith in a supportive group.

The wonderful thing is that Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth and he is for us not against us. Amen.

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⁶ Luke 9:1