

Sunday 1st February 2009

Sermon Sentence: The authority of God is the authority which commissions Holy Covenant to bring about the kingdom of God on earth by liberating the captive and bringing good news to the poor.

May the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be now and acceptable to you our God and our liberator, Amen.

I invite you to close your eyes ...

It is time...

It is time to go to the temple... you travel through the market place....

Rich aromas, vibrant colours and soul-awakening music stir your senses....

You're almost there, you see the crowd slowly making their way into the public space.

You find a place where you will stand today...

The teacher rises you see in his very stature an air of authority, a power...

As he opens his mouth to speak, there is a hush, the place is ominously silent... as if what this man is about to say may be dangerous...

He speaks, you listen.

HE is interrupted...

He acts, you watch.

This man is different he speaks and acts with an authority which is counter to anything you have heard before.

You feel that there is something familiar about this teacher... and yet different to the scribes you know. You feel challenged.

Who is this man that speaks with such power and authority???

SILENCE

As a child of the postmodern era, they tell me I am afraid of authority and commitment to this authority.

This may well explain my struggle with today's gospel text. I have been chewing it over and pulling it apart for a few weeks.... Wondering about authority...

Not to mention the presence of unclean spirits and an exorcism. I am going to stay away from conventional exorcisms today and stick with the theme of authority....

Authority and the connection between this authority and the liberation of those who are bound by illness, poverty and social exclusion.

Pause

I have many friends who struggle with the authority of institutions, in particular, the institutional church. They are weary of making any deep commitment to these institutions. I was listening to Abbot Christopher Jamieson (apt name) from worth abbey this week. He was speaking about the current generation being sceptical of institutional groups, i.e. religion.

He said instead they were committed to socialising through such means as internet i.e. facebook, msn and mobile phones.

I was deeply concerned and challenged by the recognition of myself in his words. My own apprehension toward authority and institutions, and the affect this apprehension has on forming community.

Being ordained recently has opened up much conversation with friends about authority and the institution. Whilst these friends are extremely supportive of this vocation they also have serious questions and critiques. Why would you commit to this institution which has caused so much pain, this institution which seems archaic and disconnected from reality... what is a bishop? Why do you have them?

At first these questions can resonate with my own doubts and the dark nights of the soul that I am sure we all experience at times...

Often the conversations evolve into deep questions of faith, of the reality and existence of God and the nature of this God.

Today's gospel reading has assisted me in my reflections on all of this.... It has reminded me that the authority of God is a turning upside down of expectations, an authority which runs counter to the notions of dictatorship and institutionalised

authority that causes the concern that Abbot Christopher speaks of. Mark's passage has reminded me of the type and character of the authority by which I am commissioned, by which you are commissioned to bring about the kingdom of God in the world.

Pause....

The story's context is the beginning of Mark's gospel, it is placed immediately after the calling or the commissioning of four disciples. It is the opening narrative in a section which is made up of stories about Jesus healing the sick in mind and body, breaking down walls of social exclusion, and freeing people to be fully human.

One question which has been in the forefront of my mind as I have pondered this text is how one might distinguish the authority of God from other types of authority. Not that these are always incongruent, but there are times when submitting to the authority of God require a challenging of religious or political authority.

We could recall here the life of Nelson Mandela, Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, The seditious women of the Hebrew Scriptures Shiprah and Puah, all of these people and many more worked to bring about change in oppressive circumstances or to bring life in the midst of a lifeless political structure.

pause

What was different about the authority present in the person of Jesus in Mark's gospel, what is so different about this God authority by which we are called?

An examination of the passage and a wider look at the gospel of Mark will help us in addressing this question.

The community gathered in the temple is concerned with the identity of Jesus, the "new" teacher, the "Holy one of God". Jesus identity and the character of his authority are inextricably linked. The authority with which Jesus speaks in the temple is the catalyst for certain action, action which frees a man who is bound by an "unclean spirit". This initial action is the beginning of a series of liberating acts in the following chapters, e.g. "The healing of Peter's mother-in-law, the leper and the paralytic. The first characteristic of Jesus' authority could then be named as "liberation", a theme which is introduced in today's reading and carried throughout

the first half of Mark's gospel where Jesus' ministry is littered with acts of power, freedom and healing.

The second characteristic of Jesus' identity and authority which is alluded to in the latter part of the 1st Chapter is "Contemplation". After many deeds of power, Jesus withdraws to a deserted place to pray. From the outset contemplation and prayer are presented as essential for the well-being of Jesus and the effectiveness of the ministry he has.

The authority by which we are commissioned as Holy Covenant is marked by freeing the oppressed and contemplation.

The third character of this authority and perhaps the most harrowing is found in the second half of Mark's gospel, the passion narrative. The second half of Mark's gospel portrays the suffering of Christ and the rejection and consequence he faced for the type of life he lived. It seems impossible to sever this suffering from the former life of liberating and healing.

The authority of God which acted in a certain way - breaking down divisions, upsetting social order and loving the oppressed into freedom - was crucified by the authorities and political structures which existed.

Mandela, Bonhoeffer, Romero, faced huge political and social consequence for the decisions they made. Bonhoeffer terms this the "Cost of Discipleship".

The authority of this man, Jesus, the "Holy One of God", commissions us, here and now. We are called into contemplation and from this contemplation to act "for the" world. This will require us to come face to face with the suffering of the world, but in us will be installed the hope of God, for whom death does not have the final word.

As we approach the communion table today, I invite you to contemplate the meaning and significance that this ritual has for you, the words that are uttered and the story that is told. When we come forth for the bread and the wine, together, I want to offer a reflection from Mary Collins,

"weekly drinking from the Eucharistic cup has the potential for "activating the memory that suffering for the life of the world is a blessing for those who drink deeply".

As we eat and drink we meet with the brokenness of the body of Christ, and therefore the brokenness of ourselves and the world... these fragments, though are gathered together and re-membered. From this table we are sent forth to go in peace to love and serve God, the authority of whom, we meet in the scripture today.

I invite you to close your eyes

It is time.

It is time to leave the temple.

To re-enter the market place.... The colours, smells and sounds...

You carry with you the memory of the events of this day.

People are whispering....

“Is he really the Holy one of God?” ... “by what authority does he speak?”

You are moved by what you have heard you turn to the people whispering....

What do you say?