

## **Sermon preached at Gisborne, 31 January 2021**

*Lord our God, in the reading and proclamation of your Word, we pray you will illuminate our minds and hearts so that we may hear and understand your Word, know and live according to your Word, and become living letters of your Word, equipped to follow Jesus in every part of our lives, by the power of the Holy Spirit, through Christ, our Lord, the living Word. Amen.*

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Mark 1:21-28

### **Word VS words**

Epiphany is the revelation of Christ, which helps us reflect on the authority of God, God's command, God's purpose and God's promise. Epiphany may look odd in a privatised world where autonomous human activities are accepted norms. Yet it allows us to see how God's authority is exercised beyond our knowledge and imagination. The authorising power of God is well presented in Mark and Deuteronomy, especially through the word of God. We'll see the Word of God is working with authority from God which lacks in human words. Next it will allow us to see that living in God's word lets us live freely with happiness.

#### **1. God's word vs human words in Deuteronomy**

The word of God has an authority that words of people don't possess, and it is counter-cultural. In Deuteronomy 18:15-20, God promised new prophets after Moses, who are the bearers of God's word.<sup>1</sup> As Israel didn't have a human king at that time, a human agent would deliver the message of God based on the covenant between Israel and God. Prophets were thought as bearers of the authority from God, so they were supposed to be respected. But often, they were ignored and treated with hostility. One of the good examples is in 1 Kings 18:20-40. It shows how Elijah defeated 450 prophets of Ba'al who

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 18:17

served Queen Jezebel with whom Elijah did battle. When their god – Ba'al failed them, the people rose up at Elijah's bidding and killed them. The prophets of Ba'al were too much aligned with Queen Jezebel. They told her and her husband, Ahab, King of Israel, exactly what they wanted to hear. They in no way challenged the status quo. Their words didn't have the authority from God like Elijah's words had. Time and time again, Scripture tells us that God's word is counter-cultural, which is going to challenge the way things are. The word from God is often a hard one, and so both people and prophets may wish for a lesser, more palatable word. So, a real problem is in people who may prefer to hear sweet words only. It is how false prophets and untruths prevail.

## **2. God's word vs human words in Mark**

In Mark, we see how the authority of God's word is working through two events. Jesus and his disciples entered Capernaum. On the Sabbath, Jesus entered the synagogue and began teaching. The people were astonished, 'for he taught them as one having authority (*exousia*), and not as the scribes' (v22). The word for authority, *exousia*, means 1. freedom, right; 2. ability, power; 3. Authority. In other words, *exousia* means the 'sovereign freedom' or 'sovereign power' of one who acts without hindrance. Here the difference between Jesus and the scribes is that the scribes' teaching authority depends on their knowledge of the tradition, especially in the traditional interpretation of the Torah. However, Jesus teaches on the authority of God. Here, Jesus taught with authority, and he also exorcised the unclean spirit simply by saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him.' We don't know what happens to the spirit, which appears to become disembodied, not destroyed. By losing the human body and mind, the unclean spirit loses the authority that it is thought to have. This exorcism doesn't merely eliminate evil and oppression. By denying those kinds of the power or the authority, the man's life is fully restored. Jesus worked with a different authority that a worldly king doesn't have even with political or military power. Jesus was not priests, who had the power in Roman Judea, or a scribe with the authority of Jewish tradition. The only authority he had was from God the Father whose will and the truth were the ones that Jesus acted on. So what does it mean to us?

### **3. God's word vs human words today**

In our story time, we heard a story titled, 'a shepherd boy and the wolf.' The question was, 'What made people not to believe the boy's words in the end?' It seems very easy to answer at first glance. The boy's false reports about the wolf had made people not to believe his words any longer. When we read the story from biblical perspectives - the Word of God vs words of people, indeed the boy's words had lost a true value or an authority as there was no wolf for a few times. If the boy told people only the truth from the beginning, would people believe him till the end? We see that despite what happened to the boy and the people, the truth was there still. That is, there was a wolf in the forest that could come and kill their sheep any time. The boy's lies didn't change the truth, nor did the people's inaction. It shows that the truth doesn't depend on human words but something beyond. Back to Jesus in Mark, we find a few essential things.

The first thing we notice is that even though we act on the truth, people may not always hear us. Jesus' working authority brought blessings to people – health and healing,<sup>2</sup> but it didn't bring them to faith in God. To those in Jesus' time, it was evident that Jesus acted on God's authority. Although those who have observed the miracles thought that Jesus' work was remarkable, it didn't lead them to a question like 'who is this?' but only 'what is this?' They were amazed by the miracles, but they failed to recognise what was behind those miracles. Why is it so? Their words can reveal what's in their mind. Their sole interests on the miracles were based on their desire and wishes in this world. By saying 'what is this?' they lost a chance to see the power of God's word. They failed to recognise the Messiah standing before them.

Next, even though untruths prevail, the Word of God – the truth- still remains unchanged. As such, it is counter-cultural. Jesus' authority as the bearer of God's Word was dangerous to the religious authority and the Roman empire. To his opponents, Jesus was not only a blasphemer. His preaching on the kingdom of God also became a dangerous political

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:23-28

challenge to the affiliates to Rome. For Jesus, he had to trust that God would vindicate his authority.

Proclaiming the Word of God is still a risky business even today. People, as well as people in Jesus' time, prefer to hear sweet words only. They don't seem interested in hearing about the reign of God in God's kingdom, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, or eternal life. False prophets are not only the problem of ancient Israel. Today they are very active and successively working in the world. Nowadays, we often see that fake news and false claims are everywhere. They are produced by people to satisfy people's itching ears. Since they don't have any authority from God, it also lacks in the power to save life.

What is best for life then? Stop chasing untruths or rumours, but begin to rediscover the truth in Christ Jesus whose spirit lives in the fellow believers and us, and in scripture. Living in God's Word and His authority let us free from all the delirious and destructive words, as they cannot offer the peace of Christ and the life in the eternal. In doing so, our lives become simpler and happier. May God help us continue to be witnesses to Christ Jesus - the living Word so that people may live in the same Word that only has the saving power of God with authority. Amen