

Sermon for 31st January 2021 - Jane Brough

Epiphany 4

How many of us can remember those times at school when the voice of authority broke through our day-dream and we were told sharply to “pay attention!” And more recently perhaps when we drive, rushed or worried and a little distracted, most of us will have noticed the seemingly miraculous and often irritating way that all the traffic keeps to the speed limit (or just a bit under it) when there is a police car in sight.

Authority affects the way we behave. How much more therefore should we pay attention to the voice of the author of all authority, the God who in the Old Testament spoke through his prophets and in the New Testament speaks through his Son, Jesus Christ.

Mark records this episode at the very beginning of Jesus’s public ministry, setting the tone for all that follows. On the face of it the scene is a very ordinary one. Jesus and his disciples attend the synagogue on the sabbath. But there, the commonplace ends, rather than going to the Synagogue to be taught, Jesus himself begins to teach. We are not told what his teaching was, only that “he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes” As the Gospel narrative progresses it was not long before Jesus’ teaching and his popularity with the crowds become a source of question and resentment amongst the religious hierarchy,

For those who thronged about, Jesus was a man whose authoritative voice was very different from that of their more ordinary teachers. Even those who cried out in madness recognised his power and their demons fought against it. It was though that naming one’s adversary gave power over him or her, and so in today’s gospel those spirits named him “Jesus of Nazareth, Holy one of God.” Did they perhaps think they would gain power over him if they named him? Jesus was not known in this way to the crowd. Only we who read and the demons who shouted are aware of his identity. But they were rebuked, and exorcised, for they were bent only on destruction and the imprisonment of people. Jesus could not be intimidated nor overpowered by them, he came to set people free and so with this man too, he gave freedom by ordering the demons who had besieged his whole life, to come out of him, and to leave him alone. For Jesus was the one with the power – and he still is. That is why the very name of Jesus holds such authority even today. That is why to know Jesus is to transform your life. And if you know who Jesus is, if you recognise his authority, then you will hang up on his every word.

But with knowledge comes commitment and the need to give your full attention to the one who speaks. For St Paul, who travelled endlessly by land and sea, who preached and wrote and worked as a sail-maker and who saw the end of the World as imminent, there could be nothing other than his life in and for Christ. Nothing else mattered, only the work he was doing for Christ. So, what was he driven by? Was he afraid of God’s authority, driven by a need to succeed in the tasks he believed he had been given? No. Was he driven by a desire to teach good Doctrine? Partly, perhaps, but not predominantly. He was driven by love – the love that he was receiving from God, and his love for the people he came in contact with. Knowledge at the end of the day is meaningless – even the demons knew who Jesus was, but it didn’t help them. All that matters is love, that is what feeds our life and our relationships. Relationships without love, as some people have the misfortune to know, are deadly, suffocating, imprisoning things. “Knowledge puffs up” says St Paul dismissively, “ But love builds up!” Later in the same letter to the Corinthians he wrote famously of how a person may have all knowledge, understand the deepest mysteries, and have the most powerful faith possible, and may even give away every last possession to the poor- but if they have no love, they are worthless.

This is not to say it is not worth learning anything. It is rather to suggest that everything we do needs to be done in the context of love. God’s love for us, ours for God, and for other people. We need to keep a track on our motives for the things we do – if we act only out of sense of duty, or only out of a sense of guilt, then we maybe missing something.

If our quest in our religion is only all that there is to know, then too, we may be missing something. Let us be driven by love in all that we do, and we will find ourselves more closer to God.

Amen