



Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life. **Amen**

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Who do you regard as having authority? What is it about them which gives them that authority?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

God of authority and gentleness,
your powerful word called our world into life,
and by your word, it is held together.
To those in despair, you speak hope.
To those on the margins, you speak welcome.
To those in darkness, you speak truth.
In your living Word, Jesus Christ,

you gather all things together in the heavens and on earth,
and through your Holy Spirit,
you refresh, renew, rebuke and redeem.
God of authority and gentleness,
we offer you our praises. **Amen**

Psalm 111 (Singing the Faith 826)

Alleluia. I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,
in the company of the faithful and in the congregation.

The works of the Lord are great,
sought out by all who delight in them.

**His work is full of majesty and honour,
and his righteousness endures for ever.**

He appointed a memorial for his marvellous deeds;
the Lord is gracious and full of compassion.

**He gave food to those who feared him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.**

He showed his people the power of his works
in giving them the heritage of the nations.

**The works of his hands are truth and justice;
all his commandments are sure.**

They stand fast for ever and ever;
they are done in truth and equity.

**He sent redemption to his people;
he commanded his covenant for ever;
holy and awesome is his name.**

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
a good understanding have those who live by it;
his praise endures for ever.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.
Amen

Prayers of Renewal

Let us pray:

In all things, we are accountable to the Lord our God.
Let us bring to mind those times when,
through deliberate fault or accidental omission,
we've failed to love God, ourselves or others.

**We confess that we have not loved as we are loved,
and we have not served as we are served.
In your compassion and mercy,
forgive us our sins,
and restore us to fullness of life
in Jesus our Lord.**

Silence is kept for a few moments...

Receive God's forgiveness, for God has mercy upon us.
Amen. Thanks be to God.

Reading Mark 1:21 – 28

Sermon

What gives a person or a group of people authority? What is it about them which makes us trust and respect them, and maybe even look to follow them? This seems like an especially important question for the present moment, with general elections awaiting in both the UK and America this year, and with all the horrors of war which we have witnessed in Palestine and Israel, Ukraine and Russia, and so many other contexts. In a world where it appears that the concept of 'truth' is deeply contested, and heated debates rage about the boundaries of free speech and the state of our democracy, questions of integrity and of what it means to make good use of power really matter. After

all, recent years have highlighted what can happen when deliberate falsehoods and abuse of political power go unchallenged, and when conspiracy theories gain an authority which undermines attempts to affirm the dignity and humanity of all. Democracy is fragile and calls for constant vigilance in order to preserve it.

Today's story revolves around the authority which Jesus possessed and deployed in the earliest days of his ministry in Galilee. We might imagine ourselves into the scene that day in the small fishing village of Capernaum, that appears to have held Jesus's home synagogue. Picture a preacher you have heard before, a local lad or lass, getting up and starting to teach, but noticing that something is different. You can't put your finger on what it is, but there is a quiet authority about the way they speak. Their sermon comes from the heart, and it pulls you in, leaving you wanting to hear more. Suddenly, another person enters the church, and they are in a state. You've seen them before, and know their demons have turned their life into a living nightmare. They approach the front, and start challenging the preacher, clearly spoiling for a fight, but rather than calling for them to be ejected, the preacher responds with words of love that seem to carry a deep but gentle authority. And it's amazing; whatever they said, it was exactly what the distressed person needed to hear, and so calm is restored. As you leave the building, you ask others, 'Who is this, and how did they do that?'. I wonder how you feel about what you've witnessed: astounded, excited, or perhaps scared? Either way, the word is out. News soon spreads well beyond the walls of the church – there's a new hero in town, and they command real authority.

The equivalent series of first century events are described, by Mark, in today's passage. In this instance, the homecoming preacher was Jesus, and this is the first of many stories of healing throughout this Gospel. Following his baptism in the Jordan, and being tested in the wilderness, Jesus began his public ministry, in Galilee. He travelled around proclaiming that God's Kingdom was at hand, and calling on

people to repent, to turn around, and believe the good news. These travels had brought him back to his home synagogue, and a familiar practice of teaching on the Sabbath day, something that all suitably qualified Jewish men were entitled to do. However, that day took an unusual turn, resulting in Jesus's being thrust into the spotlight, and the beginning of opposition to him that ultimately led to the cross.

Mark doesn't tell us what Jesus actually said that day, but he clearly impressed the congregation. At the time, the scribes would carefully build upon what had come before them as they taught, saying things like 'Moses said' or 'as Rabbi Whatsit argued'. However, Jesus was different. We've already been told about his divine status in the first verse of this Gospel, and it seems God's authority shone through in Jesus' words, leaving the congregation amazed by what they heard. The cosy scene would not last long, though, as a man described as having an unclean spirit, unholy and opposed to God, appeared and cried loudly, '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'.

Using both Jesus' name and place of origin in one sentence, and a title that pointed to his being the Messiah, the Holy One of Israel, in another, was about more than simply identifying him. Thinking back to a famous Old Testament story when Jacob wrestled with God, in Genesis 32:27 – 29, the mysterious figure would not tell Jacob their name, because it was believed that to know somebody's name was to have a power over them. Just as humanity's dominion over God's creation was signified by Adam's naming the creatures, the unclean spirit was trying to gain an advantage in a confrontation like this, to put Jesus on the back foot. Yet, he reacted calmly to this challenge, rebuking or exorcising the spirit, depending on how the Greek gets translated, with a quiet authority that left the crowd being astonished by what they'd witnessed. Mark depicts them as responding as one, like in a Greek tragedy, but either way, we know it was the beginning of Jesus's fame spreading, as they told others what they had seen.

Now, we have to keep in mind that – unlike in our western, scientific, rationalist worldview – people in that day and age believed, as many in other cultures do today, that the world was alive with spirits, some good and some evil. Being able to perform exorcisms was regarded as a sign of having been sent from God. We might talk instead about medical conditions or a need to overcome one's 'personal demons'. However, I don't want to get into debates about these different ways of viewing the world. What I do want us to notice is that Mark's focus is not so much upon the healing, or even the anonymous man Jesus set free, but upon the authority by which he spoke and acted.

This emphasis raises, as I noted earlier, questions for us as modern readers of the text. I wonder if maybe we do sometimes want to cast Jesus as being heroic. Certainly, though anti-heroes such as James Bond are more common in movies nowadays, I think we still like to see characters who're committed to justice, who don't get corrupted by temptation to abuse power and authority, and who act selflessly. We like seeing confrontations between good and evil, and I wonder if in some unconscious way, these characters reflect a longing for a real-life hero figure, somebody with the authority and power to make things right in an all-too obviously broken and hurting world. It would make sense of the popularity of these sorts of fables, and indeed of real-life choices voters have made across many cultures and places for those promising to fix all their nation's problems. Alas, real world politics are rarely clear-cut, and the deep polarisation manifested in American society shows how one person's saviour can be another's villain. There is huge danger in putting those invested with authority and power on pedestals, wherever they sit on the political spectrum.

However, Jesus' authority and power doesn't look much like that of a strongman or superhero. Exercising his divine authority ultimately led him to his death on the cross, a turn of events about as far away from the glamour of James Bond or the clamour of a Trump rally as one could possibly get. Moreover, God doesn't deal with the 'forces

of darkness' by overpowering them with superior might, or via better technology and gadgetry, or even by employing a cunning plan that allows the divine representative to overcome some impossible odds and 'save the day'. Instead, God's response to all in need of turning around in our world is vulnerable, self-emptying love.

Jesus ultimately derived his authority and power, manifested in both words and actions, from the freedom and truthfulness of divine love. His was an integrity which enabled him to overcome any temptation to abuse that authority and power for his own ends that he might've had following the divine commissioning at his baptism. For us today, in a post-truth world in which reality television stars can become the real-life leaders of their nations, and misinformation and conspiracy are rife, I think the lessons are twofold. Firstly, where we do exercise some form of authority – in our families, in church, at work or leisure or in volunteering roles – we too must undertake our responsibilities with integrity and truthfulness, so that our words and actions match. And secondly, when we watch the news, discuss politics and maybe especially when we come to the ballot box, may we truly hold people in power to account by valuing integrity over ideologies, truthfulness over personal advantage. If we turn a blind eye to abuses of power, or allow ourselves to be seduced into hero worship or unquestioning allegiance to authority figures, then we depart from the way of love. May we have the courage to embrace truth and integrity for the sake of our messy and fractured world. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

We pray for those who find themselves at the sharp end,
for those who're hungry or thirsty,
for those who're homeless or sofa-surfing,
for those who're prisoners or victims of modern slavery,
for those who're ill and all whose treatment is delayed.
Lord, hear our prayer, **and give your strength.**

We pray for those who are feeling overwhelmed right now,
for those who're lonely and isolated,
for those with mental health problems,
for those who doubt and those who struggle,
for the bereaved and those unable to say goodbye properly.
Lord, hear our prayer, **and give your strength.**

We pray for those who're struggling to hold onto hope,
for those who work for change in our world,
for those who have power but cannot see how to use it,
for those who have no voice or whose voices are ignored.
Lord, hear our prayer, **and give your strength.**

We pray for those who are pushed to the margins,
for those we worry about amid the current crises,
for those we find it hard to love or empathise with,
for those whose lives pass without notice.
Lord, hear our prayer, **and give your strength.**

We pray for ourselves in our weakness,
for the commitment to serve you and others,
for the desire to serve you and others,
for delight in to serving you and others.
Lord, hear our prayer, **and give your strength. Amen**

Lord's Prayer

Blessing

God of all our journeys,
as we go forward into the rest of the week,
may you be the light to our path and the breath we breathe,
and may the blessing of the Father, the Son and the Spirit
be with us and those whom we love and pray for,
now and forevermore. **Amen**