A Man of Authority

Isaiah 9:1-7

Mark 1:14-28

Let us pray – Heavenly Father we pray that Your Word may fill us with great delight as we are reminded of how lost we would be without You, without the Lord Jesus and how great your mercy to us in sending Your Son to save us, and how much He has accomplished for our welfare. We pray that You would direct our attention to Him, through means of Your word and spirit. We pray it in His name, AMEN.

Covenant people of God, without further ado, now that Mark has told us about Jesus’ baptism and temptation, He gets straight into it in describing the ministry of the Lord Jesus in Galilee based in Capernaum. And apart from the fact that this fulfilled Isaiah 9:1 and 2, as we just read, this point is made more strongly in Matthew’s gospel in chapter 4: 12-16, where this passage is cited from Isaiah 9, a passage that speaks of light coming into the darkness of the area of Galilee. Quite apart from that there is also another advantage in that the Lord Jesus begins this ministry far from Jerusalem and from the strongest opposition in the earlier stages of His ministry of course. He often told people not to spread things too far, and too loudly, perhaps lest the opposition would increase too quickly – propelling Him to the cross too fast from a human point of view. Now Mark wants us to see the main features of Jesus’ ministry here – he wants to get down quickly to this to show the main features of Jesus ministry – and so he introduces these things right away. One of the main features of that ministry that becomes clear right from the start is the great authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is indeed divine authority. And we see that authority here in three areas in this passage. First of all, authority in preaching and teaching; Secondly, authority in calling disciples; and thirdly, authority in casting out demons.

In the first place, even the content of the Lord Jesus’ preaching and teaching shows this great authority. In verse 2 we read a summary statement of the content of that preaching which uses a word to describe what He did as heralding, which already tells us the same thing, because a herald is someone who comes and speaks with the kings’ authority, on behalf of the king, so that Lord Jesus comes, heralding and this is what He says he talks about the gospel of God, or as many manuscripts have it – the gospel of the kingdom of God. And in Matthew’s parallel passage in Matt. 4:23, that is indeed the way it is described or summed up as the gospel of the kingdom of God. Which is the good news that the kingdom of God has now come near. It is broken in, it is come near to sinners, and it is come in a way that it is there to stay, and it is come near in a way that enables sinners to flock into that kingdom, because the King had come. And this was the burden of New Testament preaching. And it was the burden of the Lord Jesus’ teaching and of the apostles, and it is in many ways, you can describe this as the great theme of the Bible, the gospel of the kingdom. The coming near of the kingdom in the king.

Jesus also mentions that this kingdom is at hand because the time is fulfilled. That means that all of the preparations that needed to be made for this new era to come in, all of those preparations were now finished. John the Baptist had finished his preparatory work. He had now been taken into custody at this point as we read. The Old Testament era was over. Now was the time for the Messiah to bring His work and to declare the coming of the kingdom in fulfilment of everything that John the Baptist had said, and everything that the Old Testament had been saying as well.

In addition to that declaration, it was also His task to repeat John’s call to repent and believe. We might call that application. The substance of the message - the kingdom is at hand; the application of the message - repent and believe. Same as what John said. John said, repent and believe because the axe is laid to the root of the tree. The Messiah is about to come and He is coming in judgement. And He is going to judge Israel, but He is also going to judge the world. Therefore repent and believe. And you get some taste of that if you read Matthew 7:13-27 – that warning of coming judgement.

But the Lord Jesus adds to what John says – he says repent and believe in the gospel because the kingdom is at hand. And this is a very positive way of putting it. In keeping with the joy that is appropriate for the arrival of the bridegroom. In other words, that you don’t just say repent or else, which is, in a sense, a part of what we have to say to people. Repent, because judgement is coming. But there is this other side of it too, this call to repent because here is this opportunity that is too good to be missed. The kingdom is near – now is the time - and that is a very positive way of putting it and that is also very much a part of what we have to say.

Now I want you to think about this for a minute, how this might have been received – these words of the Lord Jesus, and also for that matter, of John the Baptist. I mentioned this in a previous sermon, but remember that at this point, Israel had had no prophet for a few hundred years. And then suddenly they get John the Baptist on the scene authoritatively declaring that judgement is near; authoritatively saying the Messiah is about to come; and authoritatively commanding the people to respond to that in repentance and belief. And John is able to do that because obviously he is a prophet of God. He comes with the authority of God. And then Jesus follows hard on John’s heels and He authoritatively shows Himself as the Messiah. He confirms John’s message in that way. He authoritatively declares that a new age is come, that fulfilment has come, and then he also authoritatively commands the people, calls them to repent and believe.

Now the point I want to make is this. How could Jesus know all of that, or John too, for that matter. How could they know all of these things? And how could they declare all of these things unless God had told them. Unless they were prophets. The Lord Jesus is at least a prophet, of course, He is more than that we know – He is the great prophet. But even more than that, He is the one that as He comes with this ‘thus says the Lord’ with this declaration of what God has told Him to say, He also comes claiming that He is the one who comes in fulfilment. He is the one who comes as Messiah. He is more than the great prophet.

And this is the reason why there was such amazement at His preaching. Well it is more than a suggestion - the text says that the Lord Jesus provoked this amazement at His preaching and teaching in the synagogue. They were amazed, and the language means they were struck in their mind. We might say today they were thunderstruck by this message, they were dumbfounded. That this teaching from one who spoke with authority rather than speaking as the scribes did. Verse 27 reiterates that they were all amazed after the exorcism. There is a different word there that means they were rendered immobile or something of that kind. What is this? A new teaching with authority. You see how this authority of the Lord Jesus is emphasised here. You get this in other parts of the gospels as well – at the end of the sermon on the Mount, Matthew 7:28-29 after the sermon on the mount – the same point is made. He said these things with authority. Sure the scribes and Pharisees and the other leaders sometimes spoke with authority, but it was with mere human authority most of the time as they argued over their mint and dill and cumin and such things. But Jesus spoke as and like a prophet - “Thus says the Lord”, indeed as the great prophet, and as I said, as more than that, as the Son of God with divine authority. Hence in His ministry, it was also often put in this way, “I say to you”, not simply “Thus says the Lord,” but “I say”. This is more than a tone of authority. We should not think of the crowds being amazed because the Lord Jesus spoke with a manner of more authority – perhaps He did that too – but, it is not simply about tone or manner as if the scribes were very iffy and tentative about what they said, but the Lord Jesus came and said “this is the way it is”. No, it is more than that – He comes and speaks with the authority of a prophet, with the authority of the Great Prophet. With the authority of the Messiah, with Divine authority. And that is completely unlike the scribes and Pharisees.

In our second points we see a further display of the unique and divine authority of the Lord Jesus also in the way He calls His disciples.

The calling of Simon and Andrew and James and John are given as an example. And I want you to note that the Lord Jesus does not ask them, He does not beg them, He does not wheedle, He does not give them a job opportunity with the possibility of negotiations to follow. He calls. Follow Me. Like a command. We would say today that churches issue a call. But when we speak that way, what we mean is that a church issues a call to a man where a decision is left to him before God, as to whether he accepts one call or another. But underlying that we understand there is a call of God in a particular direction, and that is not so optional. We should listen to where the Lord wants us and where He is guiding us. And that is why we say that the call to the ministry is something concerning which you can’t really do anything else. And this isn’t intended to mean that a man should become a minister if he’s tried every other job and failed. That you should only go into the ministry if all the other options fail and you are incompetent in everything else so you might as well become a minister, that is not what it means. What it means is, that if a man is called, he’s not going to be satisfied doing anything else because he can no more be happy in his own heart from running away from the call of God than Jonah was.

Similarly with the call to repent. This is not something that is intended to be a mere option. It is a divine call and command and it is to be acted upon immediately. And that is why these men here drop everything immediately when they hear the call of the Lord Jesus. They recognise the divine authority in it. They recognise the command of God that puts an end to all other claims of a man’s life and all other options. And they obey immediately because that is what one does with the call of God. Verse 18 - i**mmediately** they left their nets and followed Him. Verse 20 - **immediately** He called them and they left. Left their father and went away to follow Him. This is a pretty big contrast between the way the Rabbis normally operated at that time – normally the Rabbis when they were taking students, they would get an application from the student and perhaps some kind of entrance exam to see if they were suitable and then, maybe. No, here the Master commands. And the chosen disciples jump. And this also shows Jesus unique, divine authority.

The other aspect of this call and its authority was the promise that Jesus would make them “fishers of men”. And again this is a promise that no ordinary man could make. As you know, many of you, I often teach people how to fish for trout. Unfortunately, I cannot make the promise that they are going to catch anything. I can’t guarantee that. If I had a dollar for every person who had joked to me, Aaah, fisher of men, are you? It’s been said many, many times. If I had a dollar for every time, I’d be rich by now. But I think we need to understand that this term “fisher of men” is not a joking matter actually. It’s not a thing to be trivialised. It is a very weighty matter. And it has a very deep background in the Old Testament. Because again and again in the Old Testament, this illustration of God fishing, comes up in a particular context. You find it in Jeremiah 16:16, Ezek. 29:4ff, and Ezek 38:4, Amos 4:2, Habb. 1:14-17, where again and again, in different words, but similar idea, fishing is used as a metaphor for what God does to gather people together – the ones He has chosen and ordained for judgement. Those that he hooks in, or reels in, as we might say today, and they cannot escape from that, those who are rebellious being fished for judgement.

As both John and Jesus warned, the Messiah’s coming meant that there would be a final judgement around the corner. And the drag net was going to drag all the fish in for that purpose, as well as for sorting out those who were saved. Because the Messiah comes, both to save – in His first coming, primarily that and in His second coming, He comes to judge. Now at His first coming, He is teaching His disciples how to rescue – how to rescue men from the wrath that is to come when the Lord Jesus returns. And so they are being taught, this time with an emphasis on fishing, as something that God does to save, not just to judge, but also to save. And even this promise then, seen in that light, this promise of making men fishers of men, implies divine Messianic authority – the authority of Jesus to save, as well as to judge the world.

In the third and the final place, we see the Lord’s unique and divine authority in the confrontation with the demon in the synagogue in Capernaum. Remember what we read about in Isaiah 9: verses 1 and 2, a little earlier, that said that Galilee was going to be in spiritual darkness when the Messiah would come and shed His light. Well things must have been pretty dark indeed if there could be such a situation as this, that a demon can freely enter into a congregation of God’s people while they are worshipping Him. You imagine that, a demon in church. It’s not clear from the text whether the man burst in when the service was already in progress, or, whether he was already seated there inside the man that he had possessed. But either way, this indicates something of the spiritual darkness that existed not only in Galilee at that time, but also in Israel as a whole, that Satan could so easily possess those who were members of the covenant community.

When the Lord Jesus cast out demons, much of the time, it is of people who are members of the covenant community. And I don’t say that to go along with, or suggest what many people today talk about how Christians can be possessed today, and they can be oppressed by Satan, and such things, I am not talking about that – but in a time when God’s church was largely apostate – Satan had an easier way then in dealing with those who claimed to be God’s people.

And he was able even then, to enter a church, as it were, in the Old Testatment sense. And as we read here, when Jesus walks in, the demon confronts him. He singles Him out, and he shouts at Him in front of the people there, “You’ve come to destroy us, you’ve come to destroy our kingdom. But we should really be having nothing to do with each other. You’ve got your lot, we’ve got ours. Let’s just keep to our own side of the fence, shall we?” Perhaps the suggestion is that Jesus is a troublemaker. That He is creating trouble, He could have let things lie. But no, He has to come in and bring about this confrontation. Of course, we really know who the one causing the confrontation is.

It reminds me a little bit of a certain politician a few years ago, who confronted people at one of the marches against some of the ungodly laws that were being put forward. This particular politician screamed in a terrible way at the people who were protesting at the ungodliness “You people are so hateful”. Some of you might remember that. The media made quite a fuss about it. Well, we know who was really being beside themselves with anger and hatred. And so, here the demon makes these accusations. But he is the troublemaker – Satan is the troublemaker.

The demon also mentions Jesus as the Holy One of God – perhaps because he knew that Jesus was not ready yet to openly proclaim Himself in all Israel, and this might also even turn the crowd against Him and cause trouble by prematurely identifying Him with God.

But the Lord rebukes the demon, “be quiet and come out”. Three words in the Greek, or five, depending on which manuscript you look at – and these few words with the power to silence a demon utterly and to cast him out. The evil spirit throws the man into convulsions and screams, but he comes out as ordered. And this demonstrates the sovereign power of God, once again it demonstrates the sovereign power of the Word of God - even one little word is enough to overturn the work of Satan. And it was a mark of the coming of God’s kingdom that this would happen. We see that in Matt. 12:28 “ But if I cast out demons by the spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you”. The very message that the Lord Jesus had just been proclaiming.

Once again, this creates amazement in the congregation – verse 27, which quickly spreads throughout the whole region – verse 28. But the word that is used for ‘amazement’ in this case is the word that implies an element of fear. People were scared by this level of authority, and that is really not surprising because it is with the same authority that the Lord Jesus was also calling on them to repent and believe, calling for radical change on their part, or face the wrath of God. People will often tolerate authority until the point where that authority comes to bear on them personally. And to tell them things they don’t want to hear, or to do things they don’t want to do. And then the authority becomes more of an issue and a problem to them.

And this alerts us to the reason why this account is so important for us today. Because it is the same Lord Jesus Christ who calls upon us by His word and spirit, certainly to repent of our sins. And to believe in Him, to believe in the gospel - but also to follow Him. These are commands. These are claims. This is a call that will radically affect and change your life - if you heed it. We need to remember this call, this command, comes to us from the one Who has the authority to reveal the very plan, the secret plans of God. The One who has the authority to call upon men to set everything else aside, to drop everything, and follow Him. The One who has the authority to silence even the demons, even Satan’s domain and to cast it out.

Who in their right mind would want to say NO to someone with such authority? Who would dare to say to him, well, yes I’ll follow you, but I do so at my own pace, and I’ll do so in my own time, after I’ve done the other things that I really want to do. After I’ve pursued the other career options that are more important to me. And yes, I’ll obey you, and I’ll pursue holiness and I’ll seek to resist my sins, after I’ve had my fun with them, and filled myself up with the pleasures of them, so called. Mark, and behind that, the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, are calling on us to listen to the One who has unique, divine authority, and to jump to His commands. From the very start of our discipleship, but also right through our lives to the end.

AMEN

Let us pray

Heavenly Father, we say that we recognise the authority of Your Son, that we recognise Your authority, the authority of Your Word. We also confess Your power and authority to bring us to faith. Your sovereign power in granting that we would enter Your kingdom. And we also recognise Your authority that You have given to Your Son all authority in heaven and earth to return and judge this world as well. But Father, when it comes to sin in our lives, we confess we often go our own way. Will you help us to bow before the Lordship of Christ in all areas of life, and not just in theory, but also in deed.

We pray it in His name, AMEN.