



The ancient book of Judges ends with a wonderful little description of the culture: *In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.*

Sound familiar? "You can't tell me what to do, this is a free country!" "I don't care what the experts say, I know the truth!" Where does authority lie in our culture? With the best spin doctor? With the strongest voice? Or is there no authority and people do what they think is right?

Mark begins his telling of the story of Jesus' public ministry, and at the same time

beginning the revelation of Jesus' identity, with this account of him being confronted by a heckler in the Capernaum synagogue. It may seem very strange, and maybe even irrelevant, to us because it talks about demons and exorcism. But this is an important story in the long line of conveying to people the will of God. The ending of Judges sets up the story of Samuel as a prophet, one in the line of Moses who hears and passes on the words of God. And this story from Mark claims Jesus as the real prophet promised by Moses. The One who knows and presents the Word of God.

Jesus the travelling preacher is invited to expound on the word in the synagogue in Capernaum, and the people were amazed at his teaching. "What is this? A new teaching, and with authority!" While we have no idea what Jesus taught that day, or what text he read, the people in the that synagogue were amazed because he taught them in a way they hadn't experienced before. They were used to teachers who taught from other people's insights; derived or referred authority. "Rabbi so and so says this, or you have heard that." They were used to teachers who taught from precedent and established canon; teaching that focussed on Law and the proper interpretation. Jesus came into their synagogue and taught them by saying, "I say ...". This was a new authority that came from being a confident, independent interpreter of scripture. Jesus' authority came from being free from all the layers of interpretation and dogma that had built up, to proclaim the word of God. His authority came from being an authentic, free person before God, hearing and stating the Word, and, at the same time, treating the synagogue as people who needed to hear the Word of God.

And in a warning to the early church, Mark shows that evil can be present even in the holy places. A man under some control – we might talk about mental illness instead of a demon possession – pops up and begins to abuse and accuse Jesus. In response, Jesus displays authority in a way that looks like power, the sort of power he was offered in the temptations. However, instead of ordering the man to be silent, he addresses the disorder in the man, and brings liberty. What looks like authority and power is something different in Jesus hands. Where we see a troublesome embarrassment, Jesus sees a person in need. Where power would have cast the man out of the synagogue or had him bound, Jesus' authority brings liberty. Jesus the authentic person sees someone who needs to be freed from captivity and brought before God as an authentic, whole person. In Jesus, authority is both not power and more powerful than power.

This link between authority and liberty is contained in the Greek word used; 'exousia'. This is more than a lesson in linguistics or grammar, this is a window into ancient Mediterranean culture that allows us to better understand what is happening in this story, and what that might say to our own liberty obsessed modern culture.

What did the ancient world see in those two, for us very diverse, concepts – authority and liberty - that allowed them to have one word for both? A word that can also mean power or privilege. Maybe it's in the social structure, either you were a slave or a slave owner - so, liberty can be seen as 'self-authority', or authority can be seen as 'freedom to act.' But this story of the in breaking of God's rule shows that authority and liberty are both about bringing people true freedom.

Our modern, independence driven, culture sees authority and liberty as opposites. The saddening demonstrations during the pandemic show how deeply felt that idea of liberty is. And social media reinforces the idea that liberty is not just 'I am free to hold certain beliefs', but also, "I am free to ridicule, belittle, and abuse you for your beliefs'. And unfortunately, that flows through to the church; our Protestant heritage has rejected the Pope but has raised a whole lot of little popes who see Jesus only in terms of power – the divine, ruling, Son of God – and who want to exercise power in the church and the world. Power over belief and practice, power over entry to the kingdom, and power over morals and behaviour. Against that power stands Jesus, the authority who brings liberty.

Jesus, the Word, who offers teaching that's about truth and life instead of dogma and inferred authority.

Jesus, the self-authorising person, who sees people captive to power, and offers liberty. Jesus, the authentic person, who calls us to be authentic people before God; people who understand the enveloping love of God and set aside power, and judgement, and rejection, and superiority, and live acceptance.

Jesus the righteous One who addresses sin, but not through recrimination and rejection, but through boldly demonstrating the better way.

Jesus the One who welcomes difference – Jew and Gentile, weak and strong, male and female, rich and poor, sinner and saint – and forges community.

Jesus is not about authority in the sense of power, and we should not operate as communities of authority as power. In the authority of Jesus as our Lord, we are set free, but bound together in the will of God. Free to follow as best we can, free to have our own understanding – seeing scripture as 66 different approaches to the One God – but called to live as authentic people before God. The walk of faith, with the changes that Jesus brings in our lives, is hard, and we are not all in the same place, but we are all loved, accepted, and included for ourselves, our abilities, and our insights.