

Power in Words

Mark 1:21-28

Introduction

“Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me.” So goes the old saying which we know to be terribly wrong. My brother may have managed to throw a rock at me scoring a direct hit in the middle of my forehead, such that I can still feel the damaged bone there today, but that physical pain is nothing compared to the pain words can cause. It’s horrible to feel like you’re ugly, that you don’t live up to people expectations, or simply that people don’t want to be your friend.

Name-calling and bullying with words may not directly cause broken bones but we know that it can lead to self-harm, mental hurt and even suicide. Words have power and this is not just at the individual level. Mobs are often roused to violence when hearing about some attack on one of their own and before any country undertakes any sanction, fires a shot, or drops any bombs there will have been many words spoken to rattle the sabres and prepare the population for conflict.

The power of words is also seen in Jesus, who is described in John’s Gospel as the Word become flesh. In these verses from Mark’s Gospel we see that Jesus has power to speak and power to silence and that this power raises questions for others.

Power in Speak (Mark 1:21-22)

As Jesus begins his public ministry we see that there is a focus on his teaching and the power contained in his words. “They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.”

Many of us have heard powerful speakers and it has been well documented how Winston Churchill inspired the people of Britain and her allies in World War 2 and the movie, *The King’s Speech*, underlies the importance of the radio broadcasts which King George VI made in announcing the declaration of that war. Do we have in Jesus

simply another great orator? What makes Jesus so unique compared to the teachers of the law that the people were normally used to hearing?

It has been pointed out that it was the tradition of the time that teachers of the law would invoke other teachers as authority and so listening to one of those teachers could sound like you're simply listening to a list of quotes, "This rabbi says this..." and "this rabbi says that..." Jesus could well have been alluding to this when we have records to him saying, "You have heard it said ... but I say to you ..." If Jesus was speaking with passion and personal conviction, then yes, this would sound like he was speaking with an authority which the teachers of the law didn't have?

Jesus is presented in the Bible as both fully human as well as fully divine and so, at a human level, yes, I do think we would have heard Jesus display a certain amount of skill as a speaker and teacher. However, I don't think that's the whole story. I think that both the content of Jesus' teaching as well as his presence also meant that people recognised God speaking here. Jesus knows the power of words and, while we don't have the specific content of his teaching mentioned on this occasion, we know that Jesus' teaching focused on people having an accurate understanding of the kingdom of God.

We've mentioned in previous weeks that Jesus was both the Messiah and Son of God and that the Jewish people had great expectations of what kind of Rescuer Yahweh was going to send and what kind of kingdom God would establish (which predominantly consisted of kicking out the Romans so that the Jews became a free and great country again). Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God and about himself had to come with power and authority because, while Jesus came as Messiah and Son of God in fulfilment of the prophecies and promises of God which we have recorded in the Old Testament, Jesus wanted to teach and explain, what kind of rescuer he was and what the kingdom of God would really be like, because it was different to their expectations.

If the opening of this section shows that Jesus had the power to speak, the next few verses also show that Jesus had the power to silence.

Power to Silence (Mark 1:23-26)

So Jesus, in his speaking is a capable teacher at a human level but there is also more to Jesus and his authority and that is that God is at work here. This is confirmed by the crying out of the man in the Synagogue who was possessed by a demon. “Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, ‘What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!’”

We have here, at the start of Jesus’ public ministry, a confrontation with an impure spirit. Jesus, the Holy One of God who operates in the power of the Holy Spirit (as shown at his baptism), is viewed as a direct threat to the impure spirit. It could be that the impure spirit is asking a question, “Have you come to destroy us?” but it can also be written as a statement, “You have come to destroy us.” The impure spirit, recognising who Jesus truly is, recognises the danger to itself and can’t handle the presence of the Holy Spirit.

It is interesting that a person who is possessed by, or possibly better worded, oppressed by, an impure spirit should have been able to be in attendance at a synagogue. Is it that the impure spirit did not feel under threat in the synagogue because the teachers of the law had become so weak in their teaching? As mentioned before, it appears that teachers of the law would invoke other teachers as their authority when they were teaching. When people look to other humans as their source of understanding and authority for understanding the spiritual world, instead of having confidence to share what God has said, then impure spirits and other spiritual forces are not threatened. When Jesus turns up though, declaring the truth of the kingdom of God and operating in the power of the Holy Spirit, conflict inevitably results.

There is more that can be said about impure spirits and demon oppression and so I will return to this topic in future weeks but I will say in passing that spiritual forces are most definitely real and if we don’t take them seriously we are unlikely to truly

impact our communities for Christ. Without taking the spiritual battle into consideration we will look for human ways of convincing people to consider Jesus or come to church. However, when we recognise the spiritual battle that we're in, we understand that we're to pray that God will open the eyes of people who suffer from spiritual blindness . We need to pray that people will recognise who Jesus is and the authority which he has and so put their trust in him.

Turning back to this section of Mark, I want to pay attention on the conflict between Jesus and the impure spirit which is the focus of this passage. Most significantly, the challenge here is to Jesus' authority. The demon possessed man cries out after the crowd had recognised the authority which Jesus had.

How does Jesus respond to the presence and challenge of the impure spirit? We have seen that Jesus has power to speak, will he pit his oratory skills against those of the impure spirit? No, Jesus' actions are more stark and more powerful. “‘Be quiet!’ said Jesus sternly. ‘Come out of him!’ The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.”

Jesus does speak but his response shows that he not only has power in speech but also the power to silence. The impure spirit is powerless to resist the command of Jesus, the Holy One of God, to “shut up and get out.” It's also worth highlighting here that Jesus' command to “shut up and get out” are directed towards the impure spirit and not to the man. People can be effected by damaging spiritual forces but that doesn't make the people suffering such afflictions to be evil or worse sinners than others.

I mentioned at the start that words have power but, while all words can build people up or tear people down, words can have more power depending on the person who says them. Obviously a harsh word from someone we look up to or care about is more painful than a nasty word from a stranger but the significance of the person saying things goes beyond this. We might watch a news report about animal cruelty and say, “That couple deserve to be locked up for the way they treated their pets” but really, our opinion and words don't mean too much. However, if after hearing evidence

a judge says, “You deserve to be locked up for the way you have treated your pets.” Well, that’s a whole other story. The judge actually does have the authority and power to send someone to prison.

When we consider Jesus’ teaching with authority and then this confrontation with the impure spirit we recognise that Jesus has not only the words, but the authority to back up his words. Unlike the teachers of the law who seemed to call upon other teachers as a basis for authority, Jesus simply gives commands and, on the basis of his own authority, the impure spirit must obey.

It’s not surprising that these displays of authority caught the crowd’s attention.

Power Evaluated (Mark 1:27-28)

In verses 27 and 28 we read, “The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, ‘What is this? A new teaching – and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.’ News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.”

We’re told that the crowds were amazed and this theme of amazement will continue in Mark’s Gospel as people try to work out who is Jesus and what is this authority which he has. The crowd is left asking, “What is this?” As we know, Mark has provided his readers with the answer to the crowd’s question of “What is this?” This is God breaking into human history keeping the promises which he had made to the Israelites because Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. But Mark has written his Gospel in such a way that his readers are invited to consider Jesus for ourselves.

If you’re like me and find in-jokes amusing, those little winks to the audience, if you like, then you may appreciate what Mark is doing here. At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry Mark recalls how the crowd were amazed and were asking questions trying to work out who Jesus is. And, while the crowd is asking these questions and recounting what Jesus has done we’re told, “News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.” This is what I find quite amusing here. Mark has just told us this same story and now we’re the ones who are amazed and possibly asking questions as to what Jesus’ authority means. At the same time as we’re doing this

Jesus' fame is being spread more and more widely even through the very Gospel which we're reading. It may just be my sense of humour but I kind of imagine Mark saying, "See! Those questions you've got, people have been asking them since Jesus started and the message you're hearing in this Gospel is still getting out there like it did all those years ago."

Conclusion

I should probably move on or I'm at risk of going down too many rabbit holes but in a message where we've reflected on the power of speech, and particularly the power of Jesus' speech and teaching, I'm reminded of the importance of looking to Jesus to instruct me and of faithfully presenting Jesus' words. Yes, I can find good advice from Dr Phil, parenting programs, uplifting quotes on Facebook, self-help books, and even *Sesame Street* but when it comes to real authority (especially spiritual authority) then Jesus is who I need to be looking to. I need to look to Jesus because of what he teaches me - about the kingdom of God and the character of my Father in heaven - and because of who he is - the Messiah and Son of God who operates in the power of the Holy Spirit and has the authority which goes along with that.

What about for you? Is Jesus just one teacher that you have in your life which you place alongside of other teachers? Perhaps you choose to take on board the teaching of those other teachers more when Jesus' teaching becomes a little inconvenient or awkward? What's your verdict on the authority which Jesus has?

For some here, you may recognise the authority which Jesus has but you're also aware that there is spiritual battle taking place. The more you want to submit to Jesus the more you feel threatened and attacked but you fear that if you spoke up about this people would think you're crazy or perhaps even evil. If that describes you I want to assure you that we don't think like that and we are more than happy to pray with you for Christ to set you free for no spiritual forces can oppose him.

Finally, we as members of Laidley and Hatton Vale Uniting Churches should be helping the message of Jesus spread through the whole region of the Lockyer Valley. We don't have to answer everyone's questions. If you tell a story about Jesus to your friends maybe you'll get a chuckle as people respond with questions, wondering, "What is this?" while knowing that the message of Jesus continues to spread. You can think, "Yep, I'm continuing Mark's in-joke."

[Pray to close]