

(Sunday 01/29/2006) Mark 1:21-28 – Authority with man and over demons

*'They were astonished at His doctrine, for He taught them as one that had authority'* – verse 22

As we consider today's Gospel reading, let us for a moment forget all that we know about Jesus - about His virgin birth, about His miracles, His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. Forget that you know that He is the Son of God and that He sits on the right hand of the Father and that one day He will return with glory to judge both the living and the dead. Imagine instead that it is nearly 2,000 years ago, and that you live in Capernaum and it is the Sabbath day, and so, as a devout Jew, you most naturally have come to the synagogue to hear the scriptures read and then expounded upon. You are looking forward to hearing one of the scribes directing you to some portion of your scriptures, quoting Moses and the prophets and reminding you what this rabbi or that rabbi has said. You know that there will be no priests present, for they are all over at the temple, the place of worship. No, this is a time of prayer and study, of revisiting the sacred words that have been handed down for generations, that have been given to explain why you are a chosen people, and what God has done in your midst and what is expected of you as His people. You don't know anything about this young man Jesus who will be speaking to you today, who has just recently appeared in your town, but, because the only ones who are allowed to speak are those who are educated and literate, able to read and write and have expertise and knowledge of the scriptures, you know that it will at least be somewhat enlightening. You are prepared to stay for hours of study, teaching, and being lectured to.

And so you sit with your friends and wait, knowing that you are about to hear much of what you've already heard before time and time again, to hear the Scribe who is teaching today recite *'thus saith the Lord'*, and read *'as the prophets of old have spoken'*, to hear the Scribe once again rehearse the views and opinions of other men, to quote the ancients, but then, that also provides you with a certain sense of security, of knowing that you're not going to be confronted with anything overly challenging or threatening to your beliefs. In a word, you are comfortable. You have faithfully attended this synagogue week after week after week, just as your family has always done for as long as you can remember. Ah! - tradition is so reassuring, so comforting, so socially acceptable.

As you know, our Scribes have a great deal of respect for the Law of Moses, that they are thoroughly convinced that Moses' Law came directly from God, and because they want to be certain that they obey the Law completely they have insured that there is a strict regulation placed around each Law Moses has set down, and that it is mostly these regulations that they are teaching us, God's people. When a Scribe teaches us the Law, he is careful that he makes no statement without backing it up by quoting the Scribes who have gone on before him. Thus, the lessons are never based on the Scribe's own authority as an interpreter of the Law, but on the authority of all who came before him. But wait, Jesus is standing up, He is about to speak, so let us once again hear the scriptures, the demands of the Law repeated to us, let us be brought to remembrance of what others have said before. See there, Jesus has been handed the scriptures and has just finished reading the selected verses, handed the scroll back and now sits down and begins to speak to us about that which He has just read.

But this time, something is different. This time a sense of uneasiness has entered into our congregation. Today we are not simply rehashing that which has been set before us by the other religious leaders in our synagogue. Today we are captivated as much by He who is speaking as by what He speaks. Today there is a reality, a power, a weight that we have never before experienced as we sit here transfixed upon this Jesus of Nazareth. He speaks to us as no man has ever spoken before. What is it? It is not His eloquence, though indeed He is more eloquent in the simplicity of His words than others in their excessive articulations. It is not His personality, for although he possesses an extraordinary self-assurance He likewise displays a calm humility that we often find lacking in most of our Rabbis. It is not even His sound reasoning; although there is no doubt that His reasoning is sound. What is it that affects us so dramatically? Why are we so astonished at that which He is saying? Wait, there He goes again – listen to what He has to say. *'You have heard that it was said of them of old time, Thou shall not kill; But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. You have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shall not commit adultery; But I say unto you, That whosoever looks on a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. Verily, verily, I tell you the truth, not every one that says unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of my Father which is in heaven.'*

That's it, that's the difference. He speaks with authority, and not as the scribes. His every word is clothed with power. In all He says He proclaims that He Himself is the person that has the right, the entitlement of decision of all that God demands. When He sets forth the Law, His Law as He calls it, He also adds, '*But I say unto you*'. When He speaks of that great and awful day, He declares *Himself* to be the judge of both the punishments and the rewards that are to be. What manner of man is this? He speaks as though He were God Himself, and yet, there is no boasting, no arrogance in His words but rather meekness and love and humility. But there is more, for it is not only His words that speak to us with such authority, that caused us to tremble with fear, but His deeds, for there in our midst, rising up from our congregation one stood up and started shouting at Him, one who obviously was possessed of an unclean spirit, crying out '*Let us alone. What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know you, who you are, the Holy One of God.*' We were all in shock, amazed, dumb-founded, but Jesus calmly, but with an authority that none before has ever demonstrated, spoke directly to the spirit, rebuking him and commanding him to come out of the man. And then the unclean spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. I ask you, what are we to think? What new teaching is this, for with great authority He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.

And so it was whenever Jesus taught. The multitudes listening to Him until the sun went down and only then realizing they had not eaten all day. Even the officers whom the Pharisees and chief Priests sent to take Him by force and bring Him to them were asked why they had returned without Him, saying '*never did man speak like this man.*' The Greek word that is used to explain the feelings of those whom today's Gospel describes implies that they were astonished, literally struck out of their senses, filled with panic and fear, awestruck. And why - because Jesus brought them face-to-face with God. When one is truly brought into the presence of God, such a reaction is to be expected. We question those who express their encounter with God as one in which they find themselves laughing, dancing, flippant or lighthearted. Of a surety, there was no levity, frivolity or merrymaking that day in Capernaum when Jesus entered into the synagogue and taught. No, rather they echoed the words of the prophet Isaiah when he said '*Woe is me! for I*

*am undone; for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts'*. They knew they were in the presence of one who was more than man and it disturbed them greatly, causing them to question amongst themselves all that they had just experienced. They were spellbound, transfixed, riveted to the spot. And such is the testimony throughout the entire Bible when you find people encountering God. Never do they feel at ease or good about themselves, they're always disconcerted by their experience, deeply troubled, convicted of their sin, falling on their faces, asking the Lord to go away, longing for it to end, just as Simon Peter who though he was with Jesus daily, that one day on the shore of the Lake, in an instant, realized with whom He was in the presence of and *'fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord. For he was astonished'*. I have said all this to ask you pointedly one simple question, 'Is this the Jesus you know? Do you still sense the astonishment, being awe-struck each and every time you come within His presence?' Only *you* know the answer to that question.

... The Rev. Paul G. Stanley†