



BENEDICTUS  
contemplative church

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a question of authority (Mark 1.21-28)

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'Leadership? Authority'? I asked Siri, and she said,  
'Effective leaders have leadership traits such as accountability, adaptability, confidence, creativity, along with positivity and team building skills'.  
'Authority', she said 'is commonly understood as the legitimate power of a person or group over other people'. 'Legitimate power', that's interesting.  
From what you know, how would you rate Jesus?

Last weekend I attended an Interplay Summerplay weekend of movement, storytelling and song. We had two leaders Agnotti from Chicago and Trish Watts from Sydney. Working together in partnership they led us in a gentle cooperative way, bringing out the depth and breadth of who we are. The theme was around community and building connections, and by the end of the weekend there was such a sense of belonging between the 40 or so people who attended from different parts of Australia, and New Zealand. The leadership was assisted by having specific forms that we practised. These forms helped contain the space and bring a sense of safety and willingness to improvise. One of the forms is leading and following. We learnt a lot about what it is to lead, and what it is to follow. Both leaders and followers are important. I mention all this, because today we hear of a man beginning his professional life, standing up and teaching, and the people said 'he teaches with authority', and they were amazed. Then there are the inevitable questions, where did he get that authority from? Has he done the course? Does he have a cert three? What degree has he done? Did he complete his apprenticeship? But they listened intently because he **had** something, and then they witnessed his actions, healing a man who knew who he was. What you do reveals who you are, 'He speaks with authority', they say.

What does authority look like? Is it structural, a position? Or something within a person shining out, that communicates or invites respect? How do I get that authority? Is it in the voice? The actions? And a leader needs followers, and in our society, followers have a choice who they follow.

I choose to follow those who seem wise, who have the runs on the board, who speak with grace and wisdom, who bring words of healing and reconciliation. Those who care for the poor and marginalised, who open me to life-giving possibilities. I may rebel against them, authority figures. They say, Australians are larrikins, mavericks, who cut down the tall poppy, and find it difficult to affirm greatness, except perhaps sometimes in sport, but even there we are critical.

Who do you lead? Who do you follow?

How do you lead? How do you follow?

Some people trust me after getting to know me or witnessing my practice and at Benedictus, we endeavour to build a trusting community empowering people to lead. I think of Heather holding the space for evening Meditation, I think of those who lead Meditation in the morning, and in the evening; I think of those who are offering small groups like Margaret; and the team in South Canberra; I think of those who lead music; Kelli and those who offer catering and hospitality; I think of Heather and Paul and their tech support, and Alex who helps setup and clear up and has much knowledge and wisdom about the sound system; I think of Sarah the founder of Benedictus, who in her humanity and intelligence feeds us, and nurtures us with her words and liturgies and listening ear...I think of many other leaders here and beyond our community. Leadership is also about naming others' gifts, and empowering and encouraging people to shine. As Marianne Robinson says:

And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus teaches with authority. What does that mean? People listen. People follow. People are freed and made whole. And the structural leaders are worried "who gave him this authority". They are worried because they have something to lose, but the people don't care, the so-called evil spirits, the parts of us that hold us back, name the truth. They've got nothing to lose. And it seems in our day it is the marginalised, people living with mental illness, children, who are especially unafraid to name what they see.

It is ironic that an unclean spirit is the first one to voice his recognition of who Jesus is. "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" (1:24). This is the same claim that is made in Luke in the parallel passage (4:34). Some scholars propose that the label "Holy One of God," is the equivalent of calling him a charismatic teacher. Others see it more clearly as identifying Jesus with the Messiah.<sup>2</sup>

In our gospel reading we are at the very beginning of Mark's gospel, chapter 1, and Jesus has just known his transformative experience of baptism, and being in the wilderness. He is beginning his adult journey of leadership in a Capernaum synagogue, a place of prayer, community and politics. The narrative centres around questions of Jesus' authority. Why does he do what he does? For whom does he speak and act? Who has authorised his ministry? The answers to those questions emerge through contests and controversies. Mark wants us to know, here at the outset of Jesus' public ministry that Jesus' authority will be a contested authority. Jesus' presence, words, and deeds threaten other forces that claim authority over people's lives.<sup>3</sup> The battle lines are being drawn.

First events give insight into the larger themes and, particularly, a distinct understanding of Jesus' mission and character in each of the Gospels. In Matthew, Jesus is a teacher and (new) lawgiver like Moses. In John, he creates unexpected and unimaginable abundance, wine overflowing. In Luke, he is the one who releases those held captive, heals the ill and infirm, and proclaims good

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<sup>1</sup> Marianne Robinson quoted in Nelson Mandela, [Long Walk to Freedom](#)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2012/01/real-authority-alyce-mckenzie-01-23-2012>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-mark-121-28-3>

news to the poor and the God's favour to all. And in Mark...he picks a fight with an unclean spirit, Mark's Gospel, that is, starts with a confrontation<sup>4</sup>.

Inquiries into Jesus' authority are inquiries into his identity. Eventually, the question of Jesus' authority — is he really sent by God? — will figure into his death, beginning with the question put to him towards the end, in Mark chapter 11:28 "By what authority are you doing these things?" "And who gave you authority to do this?" and continuing through his sham trial before the high priest and then Pilate. He will finally be identified as king of the Jews.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus it seems has come to break old boundaries, liberating people from the powers that afflict them and keep all creation — including human bodies and human societies — from flourishing, to oppose all the forces that keep the children of God from the abundant life God desires for all of us. And that message matters because it is still the case. <sup>6</sup>

We recognize that God — especially in Mark's Gospel — regularly shows us where we least expect God to be. In authoritative teaching? Sure, but also in the plight of a man possessed by an unclean spirit, and in the piercing cry of despair from Jesus on the cross when the only one that recognised God's presence was the one who crucified him.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus the Exorcist seems the only logical first ministry act for Jesus in Mark — not a sermon, not a miracle, not even a healing. But stepping into the realm of opposing authorities, and saying, "God is here" breaking into the places and spaces where it seems God could never be, the spaces that seem to hold the opposite of God. When it seems that God is absent, God is present. God is here. Where is God in all that possesses me? in my depression, my addiction, my disease? in my loss, my grief, my sorrow? God is here. God is here. God is here. Maybe that is all I can say. I find it hard to believe sometimes. I doubt sometimes. I respect and tend the disappointment and despair. I show up. I trust. God is here, leading and following. We do our best, and when we need more, we ask for prayer, we ask for support.

And I think Jesus' authority comes from his relationship to the Source of being, with God, whom he calls Abba, Father. Mystics talk about this sort of relationship. Richard Rohr says:

God, it seems, cannot really be known, but only related to. Or, as the mystics would assert, we know God by loving God, by trusting God, by placing our hope in God. It is a non-possessive, non-objectified way of knowing. It is always I-thou and never I-it, to use Martin Buber's wonderfully insightful phrases. God allows us to know [God] only by loving [God]. God, in that sense, cannot be "thought."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.davidlose.net/2015/01/epiphany-4-b/>

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-mark-121-28-3>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.davidlose.net/2015/01/epiphany-4-b/>

<sup>8</sup> RICHARD ROHR What the mystics know, Seven Pathways to Your Deeper Self

We end with an image, an icon of Jesus with his arm around Abbot Menas. It is a Coptic icon brought from the Apollo Monastery in Egypt, and now housed in the Louvre in Paris. It is an unusual and challenging image of power and authority, depicting care and camaraderie, a relationship of mutuality rather than something hierarchical. It is an icon of authority and leadership. I wonder what it says to you? How does it make you feel? Who do you lead? Who do you follow? How do you lead? How do you follow?

