**28th January 2018
Deuteronomy 18.15-19
Mark .21-28

 Taught with Authority…**

*Lord God – our prayer is that the written word will point us to Christ, the Living Word – so in his name we pray and for his voice we listen. Amen*.

First actions are sometimes viewed as definitive.

What we do when we first arrive in a new job or take over a new role will often be closely observed.

I once heard a teacher give advice to a new member of staff, it went like this: Don’t smile at ‘em until half term! Something about putting down your authority on day one in front of the class!

Whenever Pope John Paul II visited a new country his first act as he descended from the aircraft was to kneel down and kiss the tarmac – symbolising his respect for the country of his hosts.

When Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother got married in Westminster Abbey her first act as the new Duchess of York was to place her floral bouquet on the tomb of the unknown soldier. An action that instantly endeared her to many for its quiet, yet perceptive sensitivity.

So, what is Jesus’ first act in Mark’s gospel? He’s called his disciples together and he’s off – the first place he visits is a synagogue at Capernaum, the first words he preaches are a sermon and the first deed he performs is a miracle of compassion, an exorcism.

And the bible commentators tell us that all of these ‘firsts’ are important because they reveal the sort of teacher Jesus is and the sort of ministry he will deliver in the next 16 chapters of this, the shortest gospel in the New Testament.

Our lectionary reading this morning has Jesus in a place that was very familiar to him, even comfortable. He’s at the synagogue, a place of corporate worship that has been part of his life since childhood. Here he becomes the preacher teacher delivering a sermon. Yet this Saturday morning service was to turn out to be anything other than ordinary. He amazes the congregation with the depth of his address.

Words can be powerful – hence that well known, but not entirely true saying that the pen is mightier than the sword.

Last year we remembered that the words of Martin Luther, written in colloquial German rather than high Latin, sparked the continental reformation of 1517.

In August 1963 another Luther, Martin Luther King Junior, uttered words from the Lincoln Memorial about having a dream and going to the mountain top that inspire a nation to pass the Civil Rights Act.

This month has seen the latest Churchill film released, The Darkest Hour, celebrating a man whose words buoyed up this nation at one of our bleakest moments in history.

Words, speeches, maybe even sermons can lift the spirit and bring about a deep sense of identity and purpose.

And it seems that Jesus was a great preacher using his gift of oratory in keeping over 5000 spellbound and forgetting to eat lunch on a hillside, to upsetting the home crowd in another visit to a synagogue, that time in Nazareth.

That trip back home showed that words, even ones of truth can divide as well as unite.

Not everyone liked or appreciated the message of Jesus. He might have used those words to talk of a God of love or of forgiving one another seventy times seven – yet sometimes all people heard is that he was upsetting the status quo or challenging well-honed tradition.

What is said isn’t always what is heard – most preachers only have to preach a couple of sermons before they realise that!

So here at Capernaum, even though nearly everyone gave him more than a seven out of ten for that sermon, the morning is dominated by the reaction not of the many but of one man – a man who interrupts because he is unwell.

In those far off days people like Mark, writing this gospel, thought of such a man as having within him an unclean spirit. So, the first miracle in Mark’s gospel is, we would say, an exorcism – the casting out of a demon.

Verse 26 describes the terrifying scene: The unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions and with a loud cry it left him.

Last week, along with probably half the population I went down with flu and got through each day care of these tablets from Boots, their Max Strength Day and Night Relief – other brands are available!!!

As I was queuing up paying for them I realised there is two types of ‘writing’ on this package. The first I could see with my eyes, the second I could feel with my fingers. The little raised braille dots on the packet enabling sight impaired folk to read the label and buy the right medicines.

Two ways of reading, of seeing, of comprehending.

And in today’s passage I just want to suggest this morning that there are two ways of reading this story of Jesus and the demon possessed man at the synagogue.

The first way is one that reveals a Cosmic Christ.

This is the Jesus who could drive out the demons.

So in the story even as that buzz of appreciation goes around the worshippers one man, deranged and seemingly at odds with himself, shouts out ‘What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us’?

Mark, I suspect more poetically than scientifically, is describing to us a collision between two forces in the synagogue – the forces of goodness and evil. They collide and do battle that Saturday morning. They make this comfortable place for Jesus into an uncomfortable arena. It’s as if the demon in this man knows he’s been rumbled by the morning preacher, knows it has much to lose, knows its cruel hold on this individual is being threatened by the love and goodness at the centre of Jesus.

It’s surely significant that the demon calls out: I know who you are – the Holy One of God.

That’s never really enough is it? Head knowledge isn’t the same as faith.

Being a pilgrim on a journey isn’t the same as being a student just wanting to pass an exam.

One demands knowledge – the other is all about putting those truths into practice, living out the knowledge and letting it mould you as it seeps into your heart and brings about transformation.

In today’s passage the demon may ‘know’ Jesus is the Holy One of God, but that demon won’t kneel and worship God as a result, won’t change his mind or let that truth melt his heart.

So, Jesus casts out the demon and, Mark says, with a loud cry it left the man and his life was restored.

So, read one way this is the Cosmic Christ doing battle with evil forces.

Yet, I suspect, we could also read it through a gentler prism.

For isn’t this also the Compassionate Christ bringing healing and wholeness as his very first act in this mission which is God’s.

Today, by and large, we might want to say that probably many of the accounts of demon possession written down in the gospels would today be described in terms of mental illness.

I’m struck by the name given to a demon in one of the stories as its called Legion. The more I read up on say Multiple Personality Disorder the more such a name makes sense.

We are, all of us, vulnerable in our minds from time to time. Most of us know the reality, either personally or in our families, of mental illness.

Only this week the Duchess of Cambridge continued the effort being made by the younger members of The Royal Family of speaking about Mental Illness in an open and compassionate way – recognising its complexity and honouring those who battle with it in the same way that all illness, physical or mental, is a struggle that can only be overcome with understanding.

In today’s passage Jesus first act is to bring healing and wholeness to a person whose mind had been deeply troubled. He gave this man a new beginning. He comes alongside this man. He doesn’t ignore him, but enters into his pain and does all he can to bring him back to completeness.

And these will be the themes that the define the mission of God, as exemplified by Jesus in the next sixteen chapters of Mark.

This is not only the Cosmic Christ but the Compassionate Jesus who shows us a God of love and down to earth kindness.

It's seems to me that if first acts are important, then Jesus hits the ground running and challenges us to appreciate the depth and scope of the gospel as we not only listen to his words but also watch his deeds.

Words of authority, actions of love – both found in one synagogue service on day one of Jesus’ mission.

May we continue that mission in our words and actions this week, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 25th January 2018*