

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, 31 January 2021

Haddington West with Garvald and Morham

Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

“You know the generosity of our Lord Jesus Christ: he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich.” 2Cor.8,9

Prayer -

Almighty Father, we turn to you, for you alone are our God, the found of everlasting wisdom, the light of our lives, the soul of our souls, with whom faithful people of every age have found love and life and friendship. Our minds cannot hold you, our words cannot express you, for your light and loveliness are beyond our understanding. And yet you have been our guide and companion over every mountain and through every dark valley of our experience. Today we offer you our worship and lift our hearts to you in praise and adoration; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

God our Father, we turn from the noisy arena of life, with its trouble and anxiety, to you, the living God; and we confess that we come into the shadow of your presence as those who are sick and in need of a physician, as those who are lonely and in need of a friend, as those who are sinners in need of a Saviour.

Forgive us that we have so often been useless to you, that we have disobeyed your command and acted in an unloving way towards others. Forgive us if we have complained about our circumstances instead of rejoicing in your love. Forgive us that we have failed to be the people you intended us to be. Out of the depths of our hearts we cry to you: Lord God, hear our prayer. May your grace and peace come into our lives and lead us from a life of slavery and sin into a life of freedom and joy and love; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Merciful Lord, grant to your faithful people pardon and peace that we may be cleansed from all our sins and serve you with a quiet mind, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *AMEN*

Mk.1, 21-28

“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. 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!’

‘Be quiet!’ said Jesus sternly. ‘Come out of him!’ The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

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.”

Dear friends

The Saviour going to work – on the Sabbath, in the synagogue and by way of teaching. This time, place and method which the Lord chooses for going to work may startle us. Because it seems to place a high value on forms that are now widely seen to be of low or negligible value. In many places

the gathering for worship now enjoys only a low and narrow profile, is seen as optional if not unnecessary and is more about self-expression than seeking to behold the Saviour at work. Sunday, more often than not, is seen as leisure time, not as the opportunity to rest in the presence of God through his word. Teaching is assigned a marginal role and is not seen as a tool in the hands of the Saviour at work.

Yet we see here that Jesus chooses these forms of Sabbath, synagogue and teaching, which have not been new, in order to get working in a saving way. Though what he brings is new, it is here offered through these forms. If Jesus so honoured these forms by getting to work savingly through them, should they not be to us honoured means by which we can seek to come under that work? Can we relegate the gathering for worship, the Sabbath ethos and the church's teaching (faithful to Scripture and the Apostles' teaching) to the margins, away from the centre, without distancing ourselves from the Saviour's saving work for us, for the world?

But now let us see the Saviour go to work and try to understand the authority which appeared when he did. Entering the synagogue on the Sabbath he begins to teach. As he teaches, the people listening to his teaching become aware of an authority which they have not encountered before and are deeply impressed by. *"He taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law."* We know, I think, the kind of teaching that the synagogue-goers of Capernaum were used to and which they fed on for good or ill because it's all they got. It's the kind of teaching which inevitably and always starts and ends with 'the law': "You must do this! You must do that!"; "You must see it this way! You must see it not this but that way!"; "Be your own law! Make your own laws of happiness! Do this and all will be well!" It is the kind of teaching – by word, by picture, by film – which leaves us either with ourselves or in the hands of experts and activists and those who would lord it over others. It's the kind of teaching which mirrors our own wisdom and strength back to us and tells us that we are our own saviours, and must be.

But confident, assertive and learned as all this teaching may be, much as it may be commended and applauded by many, it always fails. And it fails in the same way that the law fails. (Has the law ever reformed anyone? But grace and truth have.) It fails, because it fails to be the word which we long to hear because it would unlock us (lift us, crown us, bring us home)!

Is this not the word we all need and long to hear – taught and spoken to us? And do we not know that this word is not 'law', but must be love – grace and truth? But the reason why this teaching fails to reach us and be heard as the word we need and long to hear, is that it lacks *authority*. It does not unlock because it is not the key to the lock.

I have at home a set of books which in 7 (German!) volumes presents the knowledge (late 1980ies) of the main sciences and humanities, from chemistry and physics to psychology and philosophy, with the aim, stated in the foreword, that it should hopefully tell us who we are, what it is to be a person. This project recognised, as can we all, that being who we are or are meant to be, is not a given but a goal that can be missed. But the attempt to get there *by law* – by way of science and, indeed, all man-centred knowledge – failed. I have not seen these books anywhere else; they have been out of print for some time and there are no revised editions. If this project had been successful, the teaching of it would be at least as widespread as that of the Bible.

And this should make us marvel at the staying power of the Bible and its teaching. And it begs the question: Does the Bible, as the word of Christ which it proclaims, perhaps carry that authority which the people of Capernaum felt as Jesus was teaching?

Another book I have at home (by T Keller) tells the story of a man born and raised in France who after the world war moved to the States to teach at some university. This man, according to his own account, made it his task, his mission, to know himself, to understand the life that he was living. His

plan was to write down in a diary all the experiences and events of his life as they unfolded, to record his thoughts and feelings, his desires and decisions, reactions, hopes and fears etc. Then, at one point in the future he would read it and so be able, from a distance, to read about himself the, surely, *authoritative* account of himself, namely the one he authored himself. And so he did. But when he read it, he found that he was none the wiser for it. A little later, however, he happened upon a New Testament that someone had left behind on a park bench or that was given to him. And reading it, he made the realisation that here he was reading, as he put it, “the book that understands me”. That is, he was recognising an authority in the teaching of the word of Christ which reached him and unlocked to him what he needed to hear. He heard the word that can only be spoken by the one who is the true author of our lives, which is not man himself but his Maker, for whom man is made, to know and love him and enjoy him for ever.

This, dear friends, is the authority which the people in Capernaum felt as Jesus taught them. It is the authority of the author who knows his work, knows the meaning and purpose of it, and who loves it; it is the authority of the Maker who has come to claim man for the life they are meant to have, to redeem them from their sins and from their fear of death, for a life with him and for him, to speak to them the word they need to hear – grace and truth: the Word that is the love of God!

Dear friends, Jesus in his authority is at work in the teaching of his word – first of all in the word of his cross: he died for our sins, and of his resurrection: “I live; and you shall live also”. As we apply ourselves to this word and hear it in faith, we hear the word that truly reaches us because it is the word of the Author of life who writes the story of our salvation, of grace, truth and love. Is that not what Jesus gave evidence of when he healed the man suffering from the impure spirit? No wonder “*news about him spread quickly over the whole region*” – he is the Word that reaches us. AMEN

I heard the voice of Jesus say

1 I heard the voice of Jesus say,
‘Come unto Me and rest;
lay down, thou weary one, lay down
thy head upon My breast’:
I came to Jesus as I was,
weary, and worn, and sad;
I found in Him a resting-place,
and He has made me glad.

2 I heard the voice of Jesus say,
‘Behold, I freely give
the living water; thirsty one,
stoop down and drink, and live’:
I came to Jesus, and I drank
of that life-giving stream;
my thirst was quenched, my soul revived,
and now I live in Him.

3 I heard the voice of Jesus say,
‘I am this dark world’s light;
look unto Me, thy morn shall rise,
and all thy day be bright’:
I looked to Jesus and I found
in Him my star, my sun;

and in that light of life I'll walk
till travelling days are done.

Words by Horatius Bonar

Prayer -

Lord God, you have made us for yourself and our heart is restless within us until we know you. Many are the words that promise to take that restlessness away, but none deliver except for the Word that is your Son, the Word that you have spoken and which you are speaking to the heart through your Spirit. Your Son is our Saviour and he gives rest to our souls, for you have caused your fullness to dwell bodily in him and gave him to us so that we should know your love in the forgiveness of our sins and the power of the resurrection which is the foundation of your promise that we too shall live. You have given him all authority in heaven and on earth. We praise your name and pray humbly: Grant us a hearing ear so that your Word may reach us and heal us, to your praise and glory.

- time of prayer / intercession –

'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen

May the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ shine in your hearts, transform your lives, and brighten the world.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you.

AMEN