

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B, 2009
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

St. Mark, author of the earliest of the four gospels, said that when Jesus taught in the synagogues he taught with authority. This was not the way of the scribes, the acknowledged Jewish experts on the sacred writings taught. The scribes taught as academicians – scholars. Jesus taught with personal authority. This seemed strange to those who heard Jesus. This strangeness points to something interesting. The scribes were religious scholars and they devoted years to the study of the sacred writings. When they taught, they referred to their sources like academicians everywhere. Those sources were the commentaries on the text made by earlier scholars. Academic authors, today, list their references in footnotes and bibliographies, because their sources give them their authority. So it was with the scribes. To prove their points, they would say that “Rabbi So-n-So” said this;” or “Rabbi So- n-So said that.” In other words, their authority rested beyond themselves and they looked to earlier scholars to justify their commentary. No scribe claimed authority within himself. With the passage of time, if their arguments held, then they gained authority of their own and a later scribe might quote them.

Jesus did not look for outside reinforcement. It was not what the text said, or the scholars said, that mattered. It was what God the Father said, and Jesus spoke for God. Jesus made this absolutely clear. Jesus said, “I am one with the Father. No one comes to the Father except through me.” So, when Jesus spoke, it was with the absolute and total authority of Almighty God, because the two were of one will, of one mind. Jesus said that to see him was to see God, to know him was to know God. No one had ever spoken about the sacred text the way Jesus did. The way he taught laid claim to his being the Son of God.

Now, let’s put today’s passage in perspective. Most scholars believe that the publication of Mark’s Gospel coincided with the first great wave of official Roman persecution. Most also agree that Mark’s Gospel had, as a target audience, Jewish Christians of the Diaspora, those living outside of the Holy Land. Perhaps this Gospel was directed primarily at those Jewish Christians living in Rome. What would this claim of authority have meant to them? It would have meant that there is nothing greater than Jesus Christ. Although the Roman emperor might order persecution and kill the body, a soul safe in Jesus would never die. Forces of evil, whatever they may be, wherever they may be, whoever they may be, can harm us physically, but, as St. Paul tells us, nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. This is the message of our Lord’s rebuke to the demon in this morning’s Gospel. Remember that the demon asked Jesus a very specific question. “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? Jesus answered the question with action. Yes, Jesus came to destroy evil; he came to destroy evil so that evil cannot harm those whom God claims for himself, through baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Christians of Mark’s day found strength and assurance in St. Mark’s words, and this, alone, gave them the courage to stand firm as disciples of Jesus, to stand with courage and conviction even as they faced the jaws of the lions.

We, today, need to hear and mark well these words of assurance. Nothing, no power whatsoever stands greater than Almighty God. As disciples of Jesus, we know we have salvation. No matter what, we will be, forever, in God's embrace. As we face our troubled times, economic turmoil, terrorism in the mistaken name of God; as we become anxious in the presence of the evil that surrounds us, we are safe in the arms of the one true God, a God of peace and a God of love. And believe me, Saint Paul is right. Nothing can separate us, ever, from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord! *Amen.*