

**POWER AND AUTHORITY**  
**Give at Grace Church in Haddonfield – February 23, 2003**  
**WC Lubenow**

“Why does this fellow speak in this way?”

I speak in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Perpetuator.

Today’s Gospel<sup>1</sup> is about power and authority. So was last week’s. Then we heard about Jesus curing the leper. Today we hear about Jesus and the paralytic. Jesus sets himself against existing and past tradition. He defies the scribes and, as he always does, Jesus defies expectations. These are strange stories indeed. In both the questions arise: what is Jesus’ power? where did he get it? And by implication the questions for us are: what is our power? where do we get it? The story of Jesus and the paralytic get to the absolute heart of our religion. It tells us what our religion is about and it also gives us a method for using our religion.

Let me begin by observing that, if this story is about power, there is also a lot of powerlessness in it. A group of people bring a paralyzed man to Jesus. They can carry him; they can even lower him on his mat from a hole in the roof. In part their powerlessness arises because so many people wished to hear Jesus and the house was so crowded they could not enter the door. But their real powerlessness arose because they did not understand the issue. They could not heal him.

Then there are the scribes “sitting there, questioning in their hearts.” And you can just imagine them can you not: the professors, and the teachers, and the physicians, the psychiatrists, and the lawyers, and the engineers, and the accountants, all the experts, muttering to themselves. They, like everyone else in the story, do not understand what the problem is. They are powerless and made all the more impotent when they see what Jesus is doing. And enraged too, so much so that they accuse Jesus of blasphemy.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 2: 1-12

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In this story Jesus alone has power. Jesus alone has an understanding that what is at stake is the problem of brokenness. Jesus begins in an extremely startling way. Faced with a paralytic Jesus says, “your sins are forgiven.” How odd. How can this person’s problem be sin? He is truly powerless. He cannot move. How can he commit any action? How can he sin? And then the pathetic scribes get their knickers all in a twist, saying “who can forgive sins, only God alone?” And Jesus confounds the scribes, and us, by asking, which is easier to say “your sins are forgiven” or “get up and walk.”? In Greek the word for saving is the same word as healing. Jesus understands, in a way that the scribes and we do not, that healing is physical, but it is also mental and moral. Brokenness is a matter of both body and mind. Jesus has power because he understands that to overcome brokenness is to seek wholeness and completion. And all learning and spirituality and even sexuality are spurred by eroticism. The story of Jesus and the paralytic is the continuing story of creation itself. We understand that we live in a world of sin and brokenness and we desire, long, and yearn to become more than we are now, to reach beyond our current selves and achieve a greater sense of selfness, wholeness and completeness.

Jesus also has power because he has a means to achieve completeness. His means is deceptively simple. He speaks. He says simply, “your sins are forgiven” and “stand up, take up your mat and go home.” Go home. Go to that place, paralytic, where you are meant to be. Leave this place and become something else, somewhere else. Go beyond what you are. Jesus is never drawn to the past or to old traditions; he is always pointing to a future. Brokenness is not be achieved by some sort of restoration of the good old days, the way things were. The release from brokenness is achieved in something new.

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Brokenness is found in the old Jerusalem; healing and salvation is to be found in the new Jerusalem. That thought is found in today's Old Testament lesson from Isaiah: "do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth."<sup>2</sup>

Jesus' power comes from the authority of his speech, his very words. Now notice the way Jesus speaks in St. Mark's Gospel. He does not engage in the kind of histrionic orations we find in St. John's Gospel. Jesus does not strut about claiming to be "the way," "the truth," and "the light." Nor is Jesus guided by theories, ideas, beliefs, dogmas and doctrines. He acts and his beliefs emerge out of acting. And so it is generally. Ideas, the concepts we have, the beliefs we hold emerge out of our interactions with the material world. Let me be clear. It does not work in one direction. Our experiences are shaped by the concepts we have. But the concepts we have emerge from our actions and interactions in the material world. Marx was correct about one thing when he said that "philosophers seek only to understand the world, the point is to change it."

Jesus changes the world when he speaks directly and conversationally and intimately. "Your sins are forgiven." "Get up and walk." The force of the action does not direct attention to Jesus. The force of the action is outward from Jesus to the person needing healing and saving. Somewhere John Henry Newman observed that words hurt and heal. Words hurt because they are disorienting and disruptive. Jesus' words throw the wretched scribes into a snit. Jesus' words force the scribes (and us) to see the world in a different way. As all teachers know, one of the great problems in teaching is to get students to unlearn a good deal of prior knowledge. Stuff has to be unlearned before new

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah, 43: 18-25.

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stuff can be learning. This is a real problem because much of our prior knowledge (the scribes' prior knowledge) is obtained thoughtlessly. And as Swift pointed out, it is impossible to reason someone out of a position they haven't reasoned themselves into. Jesus is effective in this story because of the simple, yet dramatic way Jesus breaks into the powerless and limited world of the scribes and opens it to a new and different understanding. This is rough stuff and strong meat because it is disorienting. But there must be disorientation before there can be reorientation. A month ago, or so, the lesson for the education program was from St. Paul's letter to the Christians in Corinth where he says that they are so childlike in their powerlessness that he has to give them a diet of milk rather than meat. Jesus gives meat. This is sometimes hard to take. To be sure Jesus' words produce answers. But those answers produce further and troubling questions. As Rowan Williams, who is going to be enthroned as Archbishop of Canterbury in four day's time on February 27<sup>th</sup>, has observed: "anything that makes us less capable of questioning ourselves is deeply perilous."<sup>3</sup>

In his speaking Jesus attaches himself to creation itself. Think back to the opening of the book of Genesis. When God created stuff, God used words. God said, let there be light and there was light. And St. John's Gospel begins with the beautiful language: "In the beginning was the Word. And the word was made flesh." Jesus simply uses words. The Greek word Logos, in St. John's Gospel is always translated as word. But it might better be translated as discussion, as dialogue (much of this is rooted in Plato anyway.) That is, God in Genesis and Jesus in Mark's Gospel participate with the creation in what is being created. Power is not one directional: it does not go out from

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in the New York Times, 15 February 2003, p. B7.

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God, or Jesus in this case, in one way. It is reciprocal. Creation has power too. The paralytic walks. And that is why Mark says “they were all amazed and glorified God.”

Words are the way Jesus understands the world and controls it. And words are the way we understand the world and control it. And that brings me to something of a point. Our brokenness, our impotence, lies not in power we do not have but in power we do not use. Will you allow a personal anecdote? You will all remember my daughter’s young son Will who was baptized here two years ago this coming October? He is just coming into speech. And when he is babbling in incoherence his mother says to him, “Will, use your words.” And he does. He says “play the happy song.” And his world becomes orderly and organized and he can function. And we have our words too.

Last year a committee met to discuss a vision for this parish. This vision is a conception of who we are, what our identity is, what makes us different from the Presbyterians across the street or another Episcopal parish. The committee formulated a statement which the Vestry approved at its meeting in November. It has appeared in the Newsletter and on the Sunday bulletin. Our words are proclaim, teach, and serve. Others might do these things too, but it is our claim these words are our distinguishing characteristics and for others they might not be. And they are not just words; they are verbs. They are not passive descriptions, they are about actions. And, of course, visions are never complete or finished. We have to act on the basis of these words, to find ways to live them. It is not hard to find ways to proclaim, teach, and serve because opportunities are always before us. By proclaiming, teaching, and serving we build community and change the world. Building community is the remedy for brokenness.

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The President of the United States is about to do a terrible thing. It may be a good thing to deprive the Government of Iraq of biological and chemical weapons. But in the doing of that thing our Government, in our name, will bring about death and carnage. In my opinion, that is extremely wicked and evil. These are not simple issues. None of it is black or white. It is all gray. And whatever our positions are on such questions, we have to find ways to discuss these matters and to bring our religious views to bear on them. But that is the genius of our religion. It is Jesus genius: to be able to march through the uncertain margins where everything is gray. There are several right answers. And as a consequence, we are not powerless. Jesus demonstrates the tools for choice and action. There are things we cannot control. But we always have choice, in the actions we take and in the words we use to describe and explain those actions. We cannot help choose because even to evade choice is choosing. Here is the opportunity to proclaim the Gospel of peace. Here is the opportunity to teach issues about politics and religion which are extremely complex and complicated and difficult. No matter what our personal positions on these question this is an opportunity for proclamation, for teaching, and for service. There will be a peace vigil tonight, in this place. And there is a peace vigil every month in one of this community's churches. These are our opportunities to proclaim, to teach, and to serve.

And while we must always be mindful of the needs of others, we must always be mindful of our own needs. This community, this parish, has been in a process of transition for the past seven years. Much of this is easy to miss because we are caught in the momentary impressions of each day. There are many actions we can take and we all need not take the same ones. There are some immediate material problems. Even with

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money from the Maintenance and Repair Fund we are short \$26,000. And without closing this budgetary deficit staff and programs will suffer. But it can be closed. Some people have already come forward to increase their pledges. If only 100 additional pledging units come forward with an additional \$5.00 a week, the budget is satisfied for this year. But this is this year. We have to think ahead. Pledging satisfies, at the moment, only 58% of the operating budget. It is not unreasonable to plan so that over the next five years so that 80% of the budget is satisfied by pledging. There are several right answers.

To be mindful of our own needs is to think ahead. As we think about our vision, our identity, our proclaiming, teaching, and serving we have to be (as Renee would say) intentional. Of course our actions lead to belief but our actions always have unintended consequences. This is the reason to be intentional. To be aware and conscious of what we wish for and what we wish to be. And not for today or this year or for five years, but what we wish to be fifty and one hundred years hence. Walk about this church and read the plaques of the people who have been here before us. The names are often unknown to us. They had visions. And we enjoy the benefits of those visions. One hundred years from now, when others walk through this church seeing plaques with our names on them will find us strangers too. But they can benefit from what we have done, our actions, visions, and our words. When we proclaim, teach, and serve, we are expressing a vision for them. To do that, we must be increasingly aware of our programs in worship, in education, and in outreach. We do not act in isolation. Everything we do is related to everything else. Our task is to express those relationships, to show ourselves and others, through actions and words, how we are building community. We express those relationships in our stories, in the tapestries we make, in the maps of our journey's and searches. And we do

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this not for us at this time only, but for others in the future. These stories, tapestries, and maps are about engagement, to use a word from the Gallup Survey. These are the engagements we have with each other in this world.

And this brings me back to today's Gospel. We have power and authority, just as Jesus had, which arise from actions and words. God is not finished. Neither are we. Creation continues. Much of this is complex, all of it is perplexing, but to fail to act is an action. In the creation in which we participate we can take comfort in the fact that we are guided by the only things which are certain in this world, reason and love.

Christ is Risen. Amen.

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