

Readings:

- Deuteronomy 18:15-20
- Psalm 111
- 1 Corinthians 8:1-13
- Mark 1:21-28

## Touched by Freedom

I earn my living writing documentation about very technical computer software that no one understands. I sit with other writers, and with translators who try to re-express my gems of insight into German, French, Japanese, and so on. My day includes conversations something like this:

“So Peter, when you write ‘Turn on the power’, what’s the *meaning* of ‘power’ in *this context*. Are we talking about ‘Release the full enormous potential of the system’? Or just ‘Switch on the electricity’?”



After many years of this, I’ve become sensitised to the ranges of meaning in words, and to the difficulties of translating them across cultures; and also of understanding them across years — because we all know that language has a gay old time of evolving new meanings and dropping old ones, even within a single lifetime.

One such word that’s evolved somewhat is “epiphany”.

You no doubt remember that Epiphany means a revelation, an appearance or manifestation. The season of Epiphany *starts* with the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles, as represented by the Magi. But it’s not just a one-sided “reveal”, like a magician pulling a rabbit out a hat and we go “Ooh, that’s clever,” and order another drink. Even our dictionaries know that an



epiphany “is an experience of a sudden and striking *realization*”.

It’s not just a show and tell — it’s the *breakthrough* in our understanding that happens when we see this revelation. Yes, it *is* the revelation, and also how the revelation *touches* us.



During Epiphany, then, we celebrate and ponder the ways that Christ becomes visible and known to the world; and how these affect and touch us.<sup>1</sup>

So how is it that today's readings are designed to touch us? Why, when the churches agreed on the Revised Common Lectionary (which was only published 24 years ago, in 1994), why did we group these *particular* readings together for this fourth Sunday after Epiphany? What's the link? Let's start with the Gospel.



In the Gospel, we're in the little fishing village (about 1500 people, wouldn't make a dent in the MCG), located at the north end of the Sea of Galilee, where everyone has downed tools for the Sabbath.

Into the Synagogue walks this young man, good peasant stock, fit as a Mallee bull after years of working in his dad's carpentry shop in the days before power tools. He's got a few others with him,

they look like fishermen — in fact isn't that Simon there? You know, his mother-in-law lives here, she hasn't been well lately.



So as they do, they hand the visitor the scrolls of the Torah, and see if he wants to say anything. To be honest, they're probably not expecting anything particularly special, because he's not a Scripture professional, not dressed like a scribe or Pharisee with their special robes with the blue edges and the fringes on each corner.

But then he speaks. And immediately, as he *began* to speak, "The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one **who had authority**, not as the teachers of the law."

That's when my word alarm goes off, with that word "authority". See, after two centuries of understanding who Christ is, it's pretty easy for us to let that slip past. "Yeah, sure, he's the Son of God; of course he's got authority." And yes, certainly, that's part of our epiphany about the Incarnation: when spirit God is enfleshed as a human, and becomes one with us, we kind of expect something special. But those folks gathered in the Synagogue at Capernaum didn't have the benefit of our 20:20 hindsight; and *they* said, immediately, that he had authority. So



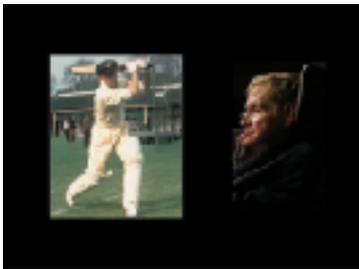
<sup>1</sup> Matt Skinner, Professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn in [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2343](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2343)

what “authority”? We’re pretty sure that “authority” means “the power or right to control, judge, or prohibit the actions of others”. Judges have authority, and police, and perhaps a few elected officials; once upon a time, even students accepted that their teachers had authority.

But In a worldly sense, Jesus did not have any power at all. He was not a worldly king with political or military power. He was not of the priests, who had the power in Roman Judea. He was not even a scribe with the authority of Jewish tradition.<sup>2</sup> In fact, those folks specifically said he was *not* like the scribes, the teachers of the law. And yet he had “authority”. What could they have meant?



There *is* another kind of authority, of course.



There’s authority that comes from recognised knowledge about something, a confidence that comes from personal expertise. It’s an innate, an inside type of authority. Stephen J Hawking is a world authority on black holes and the arrow of time. The great Sir Donald Bradman struck the ball with authority.

And Jesus immediately spoke with this innate authority.<sup>3</sup> His authority was the supreme confidence that what he did and said was God’s will and God’s truth. His authority lay in the sheer power of his words and in the example of his deeds. His authority lay in his living as God’s servant. Even his disciples took a long time to understand that Jesus’ kind of authority was not about obtaining power for himself, but about serving humanity.<sup>4</sup> When the disciples began squabbling about who could have the seat of authority in



Jesus’ new kingdom, he told them as plainly as he could, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”<sup>5</sup>



And of course, the very next thing that happens in the Synagogue at Capernaum beautifully illustrates this combination of service and authority.

The man with the impure spirit yells out, and Jesus simply

<sup>2</sup> Paul S. Berge, Emeritus Professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn, in [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1122](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1122)

<sup>3</sup> The Right Rev. William G. Burrill, Emeritus Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Rochester, NY, in [http://day1.org/697-sermon\\_for\\_the\\_4th\\_sunday\\_after\\_epiphany](http://day1.org/697-sermon_for_the_4th_sunday_after_epiphany)

<sup>4</sup> Berge, op.cit.

<sup>5</sup> John 10:45

speaks. No magic, no rituals, no incantations. Clearly he has the other kind of authority too, the power to command: “Be quiet! Come out of him!” And the impure spirit leaves in a noisy way that makes Jesus’ authority very plain; and the young man is healed, and rejoins his community made whole. Jesus’ acting in authority brought blessings to people — health and healing.<sup>6</sup>

So people could see that *something* was going on here, but what? In fact, the question of Jesus’ authority occupies the Gospel of Mark from today’s reading in Mark 1:21 through to chapter 3:6. To many people of his time, it was anything but obvious that Jesus acted on God’s authority. To his opponents, Jesus was a blasphemer. Jesus had to trust that God would vindicate or confirm his authority — and, as Christians, we believe that God did vindicate his authority by raising him from the dead.<sup>7</sup> But for those people on the ground in Capernaum, that confirmation is yet to come.



And it turns out that there is still more to unwrap about this word “authority”.

You see, the original Greek word that is here translated as “authority” is “exousia” — and exactly that same word is also used in today’s Epistle reading.



You didn’t hear it, *because it’s translated differently.*

Verse 9 of Paul’s epistle says in other translations “But beware lest somehow this **liberty** of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak”<sup>8</sup>, or “Beware lest this **privilege** of yours”,<sup>9</sup> this “exousia” of yours. The Message paraphrases it this way: “But God does care when you use your **freedom** carelessly”.

So what is it? Freedom, or authority? Privilege, or power? Or somehow both at once?

The original Greek authors and readers got all these layers of meaning at first hearing. The New Testament Greek Lexicon explains that the normal, first, base meaning of exousia was the “power of choice, liberty of doing as one pleases” — what we would most commonly call our freedom, or our free will. Then the physical and mental powers, then the power of authority and privilege, and only finally the power of rule or government (that we typically call authority).

So there’s two parts to this revelation, to today’s Epiphany.

The first is that Jesus was teaching *freely*, not bound by tradition, in the *power of his personality*. Only later do we come



<sup>6</sup> Berge, op.cit.

<sup>7</sup> Berge, op.cit.

<sup>8</sup> New King James Version

<sup>9</sup> Young’s Literal Translation

to understand that his exousia, his privilege, comes from the ultimate authority of our loving Father. That through Jesus, we glimpse characteristics of the reign or kingdom of God. This reign is intrusive, breaking old boundaries. It is about freeing us from the powers that afflict us and keep all creation — including human bodies and human societies — from flourishing.<sup>10</sup>



And the second part that touches us is that Paul says that we, we ordinary Christians, also share this exousia, this *freedom* of choice, our physical and mental *powers*, and (with Christ and the Holy Spirit) this *authority* to do as Jesus did, and serve others. Or to put this same idea of sharing another way, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, we “also are being built into a dwelling place of God in the

Spirit.” We are to exert our exousia, our free will, in love, and, as we say, to be the hands and feet of Jesus to our fellow human beings. And that *is* a powerful privilege. May God help us to be worthy of that privilege, that freedom, that exousia.



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<sup>10</sup> Skinner, op.cit