

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 31 January 2021

11.00am Rev Jonathan Hustler

Mark 1v22: He spoke as one having authority.

Donald Soper's long life encompassed almost all of the 20th century, a century that saw huge social and political change. One of the shifts, broadly speaking, was in the understanding of authority. In 1903, it was clear where authority lay: children in Edwardian times were told that they owed obedience to their parents, their schoolmaster, the squire, and the parson. By 1998, a statement like that would have sounded ridiculous. Individuals and institutions in the last decade of the century could not claim and exercise authority as they had in the first decade. 'Because I say so' might have stoked some resentment in 1903 but could end an argument; it cut no ice in 1998.

Yet those who heard Donald Soper preach at any point in his ministry would have heard someone who spoke with authority. The authority that he claimed, of course, was not the authority of his office, nor the authority of an institution (even as a President of the Methodist Conference in an age where that brought much greater recognition than it does today). The authority that he claimed was the authority of the Gospel; as he put it 'the plain teaching of Jesus is that he is Lord, that is, he is to be obeyed.'

Our reading from Mark this morning was an example of that, the first such example in Mark's account. Jesus has been baptized, he has undergone the temptation in the wilderness, he has begun his preaching ministry, and he has called his first disciples to follow him. Now, he goes to the Synagogue in Capernaum and begins to teach, and something about his teaching impresses those who hear him. What it was that caused that initial response Mark doesn't tell us, but he does tell us that Jesus was challenged by a person who was possessed by a demon and he cast the demon out which reinforced the impression of the crowd that Jesus had authority.

Jesus has authority; he is to be obeyed. The calling of the Church is to proclaim the authority of Jesus, to urge people to take serious his authority over their lives. For Soper, the heart of this was the expression of the Kingdom of God which he sometimes explained as the recognition of humankind as a family. In the family, resources are shared; in most families, conflict is avoided as much as possible and resolving conflict is seen as a priority; in a family, the strong look out for the weak; achievements are celebrated; hopes are encouraged. There is a vision like that, Soper maintained, of what the world should be like and how the world should be ordered; it is a vision to be found in the pages of the New Testament; Jesus Christ calls us to assent to his authority and to approximate our living to that vision.

So the Church exists to call people to live under the authority of Christ. But the call can so easily sound empty. According to Mark, the authority of Jesus was contrasted with the teaching of the scribes. Something more than an interpretation of the Law of Moses was needed if the listeners were to respond to the call to live as members of the human family according to the will of God. Something more than appeals to scriptural texts or rational argument or persuasive oratory is needed if the Church today is to speak with authority and to be heard as having authority.

And Soper can still help us. The tradition in which he was to minister placed a Bible in his hands in the ordination service with the words, 'Take thou authority'. He took that authority into the pulpit and onto the soapbox; at Tower Hill and in Hyde Park he spoke the vital message, offering the vision of life lived in accordance with the will of God and inviting his hearers to be a part of it. He was eloquent; he was witty; he had huge intellectual gifts; he loved 'the fellowship of controversy' and did not mind that he was

sometimes bested by his interlocutors because he learned from it. But it was not his power of rhetoric that gave him authority. What gave authority was the fact that he took on the demons of his age – the demons of greed and privilege, of poverty, of addiction, of bellicosity and nationalism – and he did so in words and action. He challenged all that oppressed people through his arguments, his involvement in politics, and the programmes that he ran from the Kingsway Hall. The authority of the Gospel is shown when it comes face to face with the things that would oppose it, the demons that would enslave us, and sends them packing.

To do that takes courage. The wonders of electronic communication have their downside and one of the worst is the capacity that social media offer to those who want to bully, intimidate and threaten. Figures in public life, particularly women, can be in receipt of the vilest of abuse; schoolchildren can use their mobile phones to make each others' lives miserable; even in the Church there are those who press send on the most hurtful of comments. But it is nothing new for opponents of someone's views to resort to misinterpretation and malice to injure and undermine. Not everyone in the Church shared the views of Donald Soper, Dick Sheppard, George Bell and others who maintained a pacifist position during the Second World War and not everyone will think today that they were right – but we can all admire the courage with which they faced the opprobrium to which they were subjected and continued to argue their case. Christians will speak out against the demons of racism or sexism or homophobia today – but they spoke with authority who were brave enough to do so long before it was fashionable.

Before it was fashionable does not mean before it was an issue. One of the many challenges that Soper was offered in his open air preaching was from someone who told him that the problem with the clergy was that we answer the questions that nobody is asking. After more than fifty years of open air preaching, Soper concluded 'Whatever else happens at Speakers' Corner or on Tower Hill, you are only heard if you are relevant.' The authority of the Gospel is the authority to address the everyday need of the hearer of the Gospel. Those who have to listen to me frequently will soon grow tired of my trumpeting the Methodist Church's podcast, but it is an excellent resource. The latest is a 'Vaccination Special' – four Methodists, an A&E nurse, a professor of immunology, a college principal, and a circuit minister, all implore us to have the jab when it is offered. One of the questions that staff in the office had to consider is whether this was all too partisan: should we produce something that took a single view on a single issue? I think we were right to do it because the take up of the vaccination is the issue of the day. The Church that speaks clearly on the question with which people are wrestling, that speaks directly to the anxiety that many are expressing, is the Church that speaks with authority.

As Jesus demonstrated in the Synagogue at Capernaum, authority is witnessed in action and not only in words. Rob, in his excellent sermon last week, drew on the first chapter of the epistle of James, where we hear the call to 'be doers of the word, not merely hearers...' Soper agreed and the work of the London Mission on his watch supported his campaign against the demons of the age with programmes of what he called 'the practical aspect of effective Christian ministry.' It is important to identify the demons that make for war: to campaign against the weapons of mass destruction and against investment in their production is to speak with authority. It is important thing to identify the demons that drag people into addiction: to offer meeting groups and affordable counselling for those with gambling or drug or alcohol problems is to speak with authority. It is important to name the demons that put poorer families under pressure in this current pandemic: offering space to after school clubs, helping with digital resourcing and supporting the provision of food when free school meals are not available are to speak with authority. It is important to name the demons that make homelessness a major issue in our capital city: to offer both emergency shelter and long-term support to those who are sleeping rough is to speak with authority.

Mark tells us that the congregation in the Capernaum Synagogue was amazed. 'What is this? A new teaching – and with authority!' they said to each other. 2000 years on, we do not claim a new teaching – we claim the same message that Jesus is Lord and he is to be obeyed. As Soper knew, the teaching that demonstrates its authority because it is relevant and practical draws that authority from the deep wells of the Christian tradition; he drank from those wells with disciplined spirituality. I don't think that I have seen a photograph of Lord Soper in which he was not wearing his cassock. In his engagement in political life – as an alderman in the Greater London Council and as member of the House of Lords was not detachment from his ministry as a presbyter in the Church of Christ but an expression of it. President of the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship, Soper was committed to regular prayer and reception of Holy Communion, never as dry rule but as an expression of a living relationship with Jesus Christ, his Lord. In the Synagogue in Capernaum, someone who was dominated by evil powers greater than himself met someone who embodied the gracious power of God. We do not need to use the language that Mark used but the battle that day in Capernaum continues on the streets of London and in the homes of the locked down, in the temptations that each of us faces and in the opportunities that we have to offer words of comfort and acts of kindness in a time of loss and fear. As people of prayer, we can name the demons – and we can speak with authority.

There are fewer Methodists in the Houses of Parliament today than there were when Baron Soper sat on the red benches, but we still have an annual Parliamentary Covenant Service and I hope to attend it online this evening. In the covenant, we are reminded of the authority of Christ who has many services to be done. Some, we will be told, are easy while others are difficult 'but the power to do all these things is given us in Christ, who strengthens us.' So we pray for a deeper communion with Christ, that as his Church we may speak his words of power and grace – with authority. Amen.