

**Sermon preached at The Church of the Holy Trinity, Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia
Sunday February 1 2015
The Reverend Alan Neale, "Bullies - shut up, be gone"**

The Greek king ordered a page appear before him daily with this cheering message, "Remember King you shall surely die". We have the pedestrian crossing, northwest corner of the Square serve the same purpose! It constantly presents to those who dare cross the fragility of life and the constant struggle between authority and power, the fight between right and might. I have the right to cross bestowed by traffic law and traffic signs but the SEPTA 'bus, fare-seeking tax-driver, 'phone obsessed driver have surely all the might.

There is something primal about the struggle, the constant skirmishes between authority and power, right and might. The story of David and Goliath resonates with this eternal tension.

We understand that chords are struck in the Capernaum synagogue worshipers as they observe Jesus's authentic authority... and remember the scribes' futile ministry as power is divorced from authority. Over generations the have become inured, accustomed, beaten down by the illegitimate power of the scribes. People whom Jesus described as interested only in themselves, indifferent to those given into their care, people who laid heavy burdens upon the already heavily oppressed, people who used their position, the Law and tradition to bully and not to bolster, to intimidate and not to inspire.

And now for something completely different... Mark 1:22 (Message Translation) "They are surprised at his teaching—so forthright, so confident—not quibbling and quoting like the religion scholars". The presence and the message of Jesus portray a congruency that staggers the people and quite definitely puts the scribes, religious leaders, into a new and dismal light.

In today's Gospel Mark tells us what made the presence and teaching of Jesus authoritative in a way never seen never heard, never experienced before.

Authentic authority is relational, respectful, relevant and resolute.

Relational Authority. Mark 1:21 "Jesus moves to Capernaum with his disciples". It becomes very apparent in the Gospels that Jesus treasures the relationship with disciples and friends; his tragic pain on Gethsemane is made worse because his friends could not "watch with him, even one hour". He does not seek, he does not want a solitary mission, a lone-ranger commission. He makes his debut appearance as the man of

God, the Messiah, and immediately sets about selecting friends/disciples to accompany him. Beware the solitary so-called prophet, seer, sooth-sayer who neither seeks the counsel of others nor deigns to listen when it is given. Too often, actually far too often, damage is done to a Christian community when self-appointed prophets become strangely persuaded that the fact they are alone in their messages of gloom is really proof of the authority of their message. Would you believe it? Oh yes, oh yes!

Respectful authority (Mark 1:21). “Jesus, when Sabbath came, entered the synagogue and taught”. We know that we are in the presence of healthy, functional authority when we observe it has proper respect for traditions (Sabbath and Synagogue) and for higher, distinct authorities (Jesus teaches from Holy Scriptures). There are primal truths that we ignore at our peril, there are eternal verities that we neglect at our cost, there are divine perspectives that we belittle in jeopardy. Jesus’ teaching is new because of the authority with which it is expressed and executed but it remains ancient in its content.

Relevant Authority (Mark 1:23). “Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit who cried out...”. Too much that passes for authority seems irrelevant for daily living, unrelated to life’s surprises and extraneous to the vicissitudes we confront. Before ever the scribes speak with authority, the human problem before them must be squeezed, forced into their limited categories. An authentic authority relates to all people, in all dilemmas even... a wild man making strange noises in a faith community; the scene is not totally unfamiliar.

Resolute Authority (Mark 1:25-26). “Jesus rebuked him and... the spirit...came out of him”. Authentic, impressive, genuine authority gets things done - expels the demons and makes the broken whole. This authority is not content with grand gestures, taking postures rather than making positions; this authority is not “inebriated with the eloquence of its own verbosity” as Disraeli said of Gladstone (who also said of Gladstone “He has not one redeeming defect”)’ resolute authority is marked by action, achievement, holy deeds as well as holy words.

We don’t like bullies; we are angered by those who thoughtlessly, heedlessly brush us aside because they have power (but no authority) and they have might (but no right). Bullies who use physical size, material goods; bullies with no regard for truth and no interest in reality.

The mission of the church may be summed up as a mission to identify the bully in social, economic, political and church life (to name the person, the

institution) and then rescue those too long in captivity, in thralldom to the illegitimate bully.

Friends, we are empowered to do this mighty work because the Lord God, the One who has made us His own and sets before us a great purpose to eradicate the bully and uphold the bully. “And now to him who can keep you on your feet, standing tall in his bright presence, fresh and celebrating—to our one God, our only Savior, through Jesus Christ, our Master, be glory, majesty, strength, and rule before all time, and now, and to the end of all time. Yes.” (Jude 24).