

MARK 1:21-39  
THE POWER AND WHERE IT COMES FROM

Power is such a fickle thing. It's a year since Barack Obama was sworn in as president of the USA. It was January 2009 and everything you heard coming from Washington was optimistic, hopeful, the dawn of a new era; this young president is going to sweep the stage and the future is going to be great. People all across the world were swept up in that sense of wonder and excitement that came from Washington; last week the BBC interviewed some of the people who met the Obamas in London when they came to visit and there is still that feeling of wonder and hope. But all is not well for Mr Obama in Washington; his opinion poll ratings are slipping below 50% approval; the US Senate now has the chance to block his proposals for change; he no longer has quite the youthful appearance he had a year ago! Power is a fickle thing; from being able to do almost what he wanted, now he's having to fight for every inch; he is no longer enjoying the power he had.

Where does his power come from? His power comes by virtue of the office that he holds. Because he was elected by a majority of Americans to be their president, he has been given power to lead, to create policy and to be their president, to make decisions on their behalf. But like any democratic system, there are built-in checks and balances; no elected leader has complete power; there are always mechanisms by which those in power can be questioned and challenged about their use of that power. Hence the Iraq Inquiry exists and the interest there will be this week when Mr Blair comes to answer questions. If we don't like way that power is being used, we can vote them out of office at the next election; those in power are answerable to the people.

The opening stories in Mark's gospel tell us of the beginning of Jesus' ministry and they are full of power and authority. These are the kinds of stories that perhaps we immediately associate with Jesus, the teacher, the healer and that if we were to ask people on street what first comes to mind when we ask about Jesus, this might be it. He was a healer, a person who did good things, who taught us about life and how to live life well. We're going to look at this in a little detail today and then ask 'where did that power come from?' While it is totally true that Jesus is unique, one-off, there was never anyone else like Him ever, the power that was at work in Jesus is still at work in us and while we're not given to do things Jesus did, the same power is at work in us. How do we tap into that power? That's a question for later.

**Jesus the teacher** What is the first thing Mark tells us about Jesus' ministry? "*After John...*" (1:14f) Jesus preached. He went into Galilee, the part of the country from which He came, His home towns and He began to preach and teach. "*They went...*" (1:21) Jesus might have been staying in Capernaum by this time, and so He went into His local synagogue and began to teach. The big theme of His teaching is 'the kingdom of God' "*The Kingdom...*" (1:15) 'Kingdom' suggests a place on a map, but you will never find God's kingdom on any map. The Kingdom of God is all about God's rule over the hearts and minds of people who love Him and follow Jesus. Kingdom is all about the kind of people that we are, that we learn to love God, obey Him and live according to His values and standards. That's what Jesus came to teach; that's what life is like when God is king; we can read any of His teaching in that way. In this case, it is about repentance and faith: when God is King, we learn to admit our faults and mistakes, to turn away from them and believe the promises of God to forgive and bless us. Jesus' real desire is to make God King of everything; and it began with His preaching and teaching.

See how people responded: *“the people...”* (1:22) What was it about Jesus that amazed people? How did they sense this authority? He certainly spoke the truth and presented to people matters of great significance and people recognise that when they hear it. He spoke with an authority that the other religious teachers didn't have and people understood that and were amazed by Him. That amazement, for some, turned into faith; not always, but sometimes. Some people who started off being amazed by Jesus, later turned against Him because His teaching became too personal, too demanding, but others who were amazed listened more closely and began to believe and then most of all, to live out His teaching. It is great to be amazed at Jesus, but it is not enough to stop there; His teaching is not to be admired from a distance, but to be embraced and lived out; we are meant to be people who put Jesus' teaching into practice, live out the values and standards of God's kingdom, and be people who live life as it should be lived when God is King and Jesus is Lord.

**Jesus the Healer** It all began with a man in the synagogue: *“Just then...”* (1:23ff) Then Peter's mother-in-law had a fever and Jesus healed her as well and then we have one of these little passages that are found throughout the gospels that summarise just so much and so many events: *“That evening...”* (1:32f) There were so many people whose lives were changed by Jesus' power to heal and there were so many dramatic stories of Jesus' healing people in so many different ways and again people were amazed at what Jesus did, so much so (and surely we understand how this works) that He became famous; people talked about Him, they told their friends, others turned up at His door! So He healed many people and gained a reputation. We will see more of these as we go through the gospel. Scholars are not quite sure what 'driving out demons' means: was it some kind of mental illness; or a more immediate awareness than of evil spirits and powers? Whatever it means, we see Jesus' power to overcome even the most difficult and dangerous situations.

The healing miracles show two things about Jesus: first of all, they clearly demonstrate His power. Here is a man who has the power to do things that no-one else can do in quite same way; He is a man in whom there is extraordinary power; no-one else was able to do things that Jesus did. Secondly, these were His credentials; the miracles let people see something of who Jesus was, for those who had eyes to see; later when people asked Him if he was the Messiah, the Saviour, He simply said 'What do you see?' The miracles were His credentials as Messiah; these were 'chinks in the curtain' that let something of His glory as the Son of God shine through into the world. His power came from God; Jesus came from God and that's what the miracles tell us; they show us that Jesus was completely unique.

Are we amazed? We should be! Maybe this is the first time you've read these stories of Jesus; maybe you've read them many times before. We should still be amazed by someone who teaches with authority and who heals people with miraculous power. This is the Jesus of the gospels. There are times when we bring Jesus down to our level and make Him our friend, our pal, someone just like us. Well, He is just like us, in some ways, but He is also not like us at all in other ways. 'Jesus is Lord!' – that was the first and most basic Christian confession of faith. Jesus is Lord and if that means anything it means someone who has power and authority, the power and authority to teach, heal, bless and someone for us to listen to, to trust and to obey. 'Amazed' is good, but we need to go further; we need to believe, to have faith, to trust Jesus as Saviour; we need to learn to obey Jesus as Lord and be the kind of people He wants us to be.

**Where did His power come from?** There are two answers to that question. The first and obvious answer is that power came from God. The Spirit was poured out on Jesus at His baptism and the Spirit brought power to Jesus so that He would be able

to do all the things that God wanted Jesus to do. God's power filled His Son; the power came from God; it was God's power that was at work in the world through the ministry of Jesus. But there is another answer: through prayer. Jesus healed lots of people as we've seen: "*That evening...*" (1:32ff) It doesn't take a huge great leap of imagination to see that by the end of that evening, Jesus would be exhausted by His efforts of healing so many people; power went out from Him. So Jesus needed to find a way of replenishing His reserves of power, of recovering from these exertions. If we think that would be easy or magical, then I think we have the wrong end of the stick.

Morning comes; had he been staying with Peter? Peter went looking for Him and He's not there because "*very early...*" (1:35) Someone has suggested that Mark here has written about a typical day in the life of Jesus, so that every morning began in the same way with Jesus praying. Prayer is His way of talking with His Father, spending time pouring out His heart to God, asking God for help and guidance and to be filled afresh with the power of the Spirit. If I'm right, then the power Jesus had to do the works of His ministry, came not by great lightening flashes or thunder claps, but came in the quiet, ordinary place of prayer; as Jesus prayed quietly on His own at the beginning of each day, God's power was given to Him so that He would be able to meet the demands and challenges of each day, no matter what was thrown at Him.

God has promised that the same power that was at work in Jesus will be at work in us. This is not the power to do miracles, but power to live each day well; the strength to be the right kind of people; to be able to meet the challenges and demands of each day, to deal with the difficult things that come along so often in life. God has promised us the power to be able to do all of that and even more because He is able to do that for us. We connect with that power when we pray: taking time to talk to God, to tell God what bothers us, to ask God for help, to ask Him to make us strong, to guide us, to help us meet the challenges of the day, whatever these might be. It doesn't matter if we don't get the words right, or we don't know what to say at all, or it feels strange to start with, but God knows what we need and is able to help us and when we pray, He gives us the power and strength to live life well.

Power, authority – these are the qualities of Jesus. His power seen in this miracles; His authority is heard in His teaching; people were amazed. Be amazed at Jesus all over again! Power and authority came from God; this is God's kingdom that Jesus brings; this is what life is like when God is King, we are people in whom God's power is at work and who live out Jesus' teaching. For Jesus, power came from God when He prayed, new power for each day. Prayer connects us with this same power of God that will help us live our lives well.