

I remember a few years back playing in the final of the Church Times Cricket Cup.

During the match one of their players came out to bat. I didn't know him at all. He was given out bowled under rather unusual circumstances and went slightly reluctantly from the field but by no means kicking up the fuss some batsmen make. Later he came onto bowl, not very well as it happens. Now that may well have been the full extent of my relationship with this guy except just as I was preparing to come home after the match I saw on the team sheet a name of someone from the church that my daughter Anna was going to. So I thought I would go and have a chat with him. It was this guy and I found out he knew Anna. Also, as we chatted, I found out he came from near where I lived at the time. Then we discovered a whole lot more things we had in common. When I got home I mentioned him to Anna and found out a lot more. Suddenly he was not just some unfortunate batsman and poor bowler he was a person who I quite liked and could identify with.

This morning and for the next few weeks we are going to look at Matthew 8-10. Not with a view of going through passages verse by verse. The aim rather is to focus on Jesus that we might understand more of him because, as one writer put it, "Knowing the authentic Jesus better is what strengthens our faith most."

The series is entitled "Jesus and the world". What I mean by the world is the created world which is in rebellion against God. As such it is to be expected that when God in Jesus entered that world there was a reaction.

I was never very good at science but I do remember one experiment where the chemistry teacher dropped some chemical into water and it flared and spat and all sorts of things. It produced a reaction.

God coming into his world produced a reaction some of the reactions were wonderful as people came seeking healing, some were shocking as Jesus confronted people and some were alarming as he spoke about those shut out of the Kingdom of God and the division he brought.

But through it all these chapters focus us upon Jesus and I hope as we go through them we will learn more of him as I learned more about that cricketer and that as we learn more of Jesus so we will know, love and follow him better.

This morning we look at this passage 8:1-17 and our focus is upon the authority of Jesus.

Oh dear we don't like the idea of authority do we?

We live in a world where authority is often looked down on. If we can get away with it we will whether it is exceeding the speed limit, parking on yellow lines, not declaring income. We object when authority enters our lives. I remember once coming back from holiday on a plane. I had with me a can of beer left over from the holiday and part way into the flight I opened it and began drinking. Within seconds four stewards had me out of my seat under restraint – well ok they didn't but very quickly a stewardess was there telling me I couldn't drink an alcoholic drink that I had brought onto the flight because they didn't know how many I had had.

I think you can tell from the way I recount the story how I felt about that act of authority.

Such things do leave us with a distaste for authority.

So what about Jesus and his authority? Many people will tell you that the Bible and religion is all about do and don't do but what is Jesus authority like? How did he show it and how should we respond to it today?

The verses we look at today come immediately after the Sermon on the Mount which takes up Chaps 5-7 of Matthew's gospel and at the end we read in 7:28-29, "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law."

They could see he had authority as he spoke. Now as we move into Chaps 8-10 we will see that authority in action.

The first mark of Jesus' authority is that it was a **compassionate authority**. V1-3...

For the leprosy sufferer in v2 there was no doubt about the authority and power of Jesus, "you can make me clean". The only question in his mind was would Jesus want to, so he said "if you are willing". From our perspective we might think that an odd idea that the man could think that Jesus might not want to heal him. But see it from the man's perspective. He knew what he was and what that meant. He knew he was an outcast because leprosy was seen as a curse from God. This made any action by a religious teacher very unlikely. However, when you are desperate you will try anything.

Jesus response was "I am willing ... be clean." Both the words of the leprosy sufferer and those of Jesus presuppose Jesus' authority. His authority and power is not in doubt. All that was needed was the decision to act. It is in that decision that we see the compassionate authority of Jesus. The law made the man an outcast and untouchable but Jesus healed the man opening the way for his restitution but more he touched the man. He could have just said that word but instead he reached out to touch the untouchable.

Power and authority can often be harsh and uncaring but with Jesus we see compassion in his exercise of his power and authority, a caring loving nature especially towards those who are suffering.

A second aspect is that **Jesus authority is complete**.

At the end of v3 we read "Immediately he was cured." There is a sense of completeness and that is again marked by the command to go and show himself as clean. This was not partial healing but certain and complete. Then in the next healing we see that the centurion comprehended the nature of Jesus authority v8b&9. The centurion was ideally placed to understand authority. He himself was a man under authority, the authority of his own commander and so on all the way back to the emperor. So that when the centurion spoke it was Rome that was speaking and defiance of the centurion was not mere defiance of a fellow human being but rebellion against the emperor. It is this thinking that the centurion applied to Jesus. In Jesus he saw one who was under the authority of God and that when Jesus spoke God spoke and, just as when the Centurion spoke things happened without him having to oversee every step of the operation, so that was what he expected of Jesus – complete authority because of who Jesus was. And Jesus of course didn't disappoint for by his word the servant was healed v13 and again we are not meant to miss the 'at that very hour'. The immediacy and completeness of Jesus healing showing the complete authority of Jesus.

However healing was just one aspect of the authority Jesus demonstrated when he came into the world. If you just cast your eye down the page he showed that authority over people, calling them to follow him v22, over nature as he calmed the wind and waves v26, over evil spirits v32 and even the authority forgive sins 9:2.

His authority was complete not just in the sense of being totally effective but also in that fact that there was no part of creation over which he did not have authority. What Matthew is wanting us to see in this is the reason why he had such authority. We are to see why he was able to teach and

act with authority and that is because of who he was. Matthew wants us to see that his authority is centred in his nature as God and mission to bring salvation. He had this authority because he is God. All his teaching and the miracles point us to that.

It is with that in mind that **the authority of Jesus is challenging.**

When the Centurion had finished speaking Jesus was astonished at the man's perception and faith. So much so that he compared the faith of this gentile soldier with the lack of faith of many in Israel who for their lack of faith in Jesus would, as we see in v12, ultimately find themselves shut out of the Kingdom of God. Here is the challenging and divisiveness of Jesus' authority. Some will be drawn to him but others will turn away from him. The authority of Jesus challenges us, will we accept it or will we see it as so many other examples of authority as unnecessary interference in the way we run our lives.

As human beings we want to run our lives our way and the idea that God has anything to say or do with it is an anathema to many. So we reject the authority of Jesus and his right to be ruler in our lives. We continue to live in rebellion against him and, as Jesus pointed out here, as a result of shutting him out of our lives we will be able to continue that into eternity where not he but we are shut out. The Centurion recognized Jesus authority, embraced it and bowed to it but many do not and will not.

And fourthly **Jesus authority is cross-centred.** In v14&15 we have another healing and then the more general verse 16 before the quote from Isaiah and it is that quote which leads us to the cross. The quote comes from the Isaiah passage which focuses on the sacrifice and death of Jesus. Now Matthew hasn't got it wrong and put the wrong quote in the wrong place and so we have to realize he was making a point and the point is that Jewish tradition and to some extent Scripture, saw sickness as caused directly or indirectly by sin. At the very basic level all sickness reminds us that we live this in a world that is at odds with God. When Jesus healed, when he drove out the evil spirits it was an act of anticipation of the great battle that would take place on Calvary where finally the forces of darkness and evil would be defeated. These acts look forward to that saving work of Jesus where through his death once offered the penalty of the fall and of personal sin is lifted from each of us. When Jesus healed the leprosy sufferer, the centurion's servant, Peter's mother-in-law he did so not merely because he saw a need to be met and had the authority to do so, but because this was a part of his wider mission to come as a sacrifice taking upon himself the sin of the world that through his sacrifice we might be healed in terms of being saved from the result of our sin.

So as we see here the authority of Jesus we see it as compassionate, complete, challenging and cross-centred.

I said earlier that often we find authority invasive and petty such as on that plane I spoke of. However there are times when it is just the opposite. Imagine for a moment you have been involved in a pile up on the motorway. What do you do? You recognise you need the emergency services so you ring them and when the police arrive you do what they tell you.

In that there are three responses to authority and I want to suggest that for us there are at least three responses to the authority of Jesus .

The first is **seeing Jesus' authority** that is seeing that he has the right to be Lord of your life to be your ruler. I may not see the need for a stewardess to tell me whether I can drink a can of beer but I do see the need for the police to oversee the aftermath of an accident.

One of the problems in the present General Election is the perception that politicians are corrupt. We have seen the expenses scandal and the excesses of that in terms of duck houses and moats being cleaned stay with us and now when three who are charged with offences claim legal aid or Parliamentary privilege we can easily throw our hands up in horror and say that all politicians are corrupt and not fit to govern. Friends I don't want to be political but just to say that that is not the case and that I believe under God we should respect those who govern us.

But when it comes to Jesus' rule people also have a problem partly as I said at the beginning because we don't like authority in general but also because we want to hold the reigns of our own lives ourselves. But we have been reminded this morning of Jesus authority over illness, evil, nature, and people. We have been reminded over these last two weeks of his authority over death as we have focussed on the resurrection. Friends all we see here shows us Jesus as God, the one who creates and sustains life and if you haven't seen yet that he has the right to rule in your life and that he alone is fit to rule then let me ask you to look again. See his nature as God and as such his right to be involved in your life as your Lord, not bringing petty rules but bringing his complete and yet compassionate authority. There's a song we sometimes sing which has this at the heart of it, "Open the eyes of my heart Lord, Open the eyes of my heart, I want to see You. I want to see You. To see You high and lifted up, Shining in the light of Your glory. Pour out Your power and love, As we sing holy, holy, holy." That is seeing the holiness, power and authority of Jesus our Lord. Do you see that?

Then in the light of that we should **seek his authority.**

On the motorway you would actively seek the authorities because you see you need them. That was what the leprosy sufferer did. He came and asked Jesus to act in his authority as God, v2, "Lord if you are willing you can make me clean."

His request was specific to his illness our request is specific to our sin – it is only through Christ we can be forgiven.

Having done that, then daily we can seek his help through his power and authority, v5 "a Centurion came to him asking for help". He had seen that Jesus had authority and power and he came and sought the help that only Jesus could give.

"Lord if you are willing you can...." – how would you finish the sentence. Help me find work, bring me healing, take away my bitterness, draw me closer to you, bring my children to faith, heal my relationship with that person... – how would you finish the sentence as you seek his power and authority?

The man suffering with leprosy knelt before Jesus and asked. The Centurion came to him and asked. When evening came, v16, many who were demon possessed were brought to him as people asked for healing. Seeing who Jesus is and his authority they came seeking for him to use that authority on their behalf. See his authority, seek his authority and finally **submit to his authority.**

In v4 having healed the man with leprosy Jesus told him to go and show himself to that authorities and he expected the man to go. V13 similarly he told the centurion to go back home. I often wonder what must have been going through the Centurion's mind as he made that journey but Jesus expected him to do it.

Both men submitted to Jesus' authority and if you say of course they did given what Jesus had done I would say that is the point. Here is the one who as we see in v17 took our sin with him to the cross and put an end to it. He is God and died for us and so it makes sense to submit to him. Yet we don't.

You know the areas in your life and I know them in mine where I still don't submit to Jesus' Lordship. I haven't time this morning to look further at this. I simply ask us to reflect and see what Jesus is saying to us here.

As Jesus lived in the world he revealed his authority as God. Jesus' authority was compassionate, complete, challenging and cross centred. Today we are challenged to see that authority, to seek it as we ask him to work in areas of our lives but then as we do that to submit to his complete authority over us.