

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon Text – Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Theme: Coming together to begin anew

Grace, peace and mercy to you from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

In February, we are growing weary of being told that we stand at the beginning of a new year with new opportunities all around us. The members of our congregation have heard a number of times that we are in a new year and that this is the time and place that God has put us. I've been present at a number of staff meetings and devotions where teachers and support staff of Peace Lutheran College have been welcomed to a new school year. And last Tuesday morning we welcomed the students back to a new year of learning and growing as individuals and as a college community.

So surely we don't need to hear again a message about beginning anything new? On the one hand the answer is, "No, we don't need to hear this again." But on the other hand, we need to keep hearing that God is creating all things new. Here today in this service we are commissioning and blessing new teachers and staff for their work within the college. We are rededicating current staff so they hear once more that they work under the watchful eye of our Heavenly Father as he guides our community. And this service is a binding together of both college and congregations as we are called to work in different ways within Cairns in 2009.

Heavenly Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

Move One – The problem with authority

In today's world, we seem to struggle more and more with the issue of authority. But this isn't a new problem. Since biblical times, people have been wrestling with wanting to be the highest authority. This doesn't necessarily mean they want to be the boss, or the person in charge, but it does mean they don't want anyone else to be telling them what to do. Parents face this struggle with children, and they don't have to be teenagers. How often do young people try to get their own way, not wanting to see anyone else's point of view but their own? Of course wanting to get your own way is not the domain of young people alone, they have some spectacular role models. As we watch the tennis being played out in Melbourne, do you remember a bloke by the name of McEnroe? What about other sporting stars who always argue the decisions of the umpire? What about parents driving with their children in the car and they rant and rave at other drivers? What about politicians or corporate high flyers who get caught with their hand in the 'cookie jar'?

These are all examples of people wanting to be the masters of their own destiny, without regard to others.

Authority is never the root of the problem. Authority is actually a good thing. It puts things in an order so people can live and work together in harmony. Authority sets the boundaries so people, whether they be old or young, can understand what is right and what is wrong. The challenge for us in this post-modern era is that the boundaries are constantly being broken down without regard for what is left behind. It might seem a fine idea to throw out the 'rule book' and start each day, each year 'fresh' and without the hindrances of the past, nor the restraints of expectations placed upon individuals by any organisation. The problem is not authority, but that each person then becomes seeks to become the highest authority and this leads to abuse of power and authority.

Teachers are especially aware of the issues surrounding authority and the potential for abusing the power that is given to them. As much as the need to respect and protect students in the care of schools is constantly reinforced, each year we *always* hear of teachers or school staff who abuse the trust that has been given to them. It doesn't matter how the situation has been dressed up, the teacher is the one who has been given the power *and* the authority in the school. The responsibility lies with them to use this authority in a positive manner and not to abuse it in any way.

As teachers have this responsibility over power, so too it lies with anyone who has been given proper authority over others. Pastors, parents, doctors, police, the list is almost endless. Use the authority you have been given for the common good, not the individual abuse.

Move Two – The blessing of authority

In Mark's gospel reading for today, we hear of Jesus going into the Jewish synagogue where he began to teach. "The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority" (Mk 1:22). It has been argued that here Jesus is teaching with a sovereign authority that does not permit debate or theoretical reflection. Jesus confronted the congregation with the absolute claim of God over their whole person. Jesus'

teaching recalled the categorical demand of the Old Testament prophets rather than the tradition which had been developed and embellished by the scribes and teachers of the Jewish law.

Instead of resenting Jesus teaching with authority, there is almost a sense of relief in the people gathered to hear him. No longer do we have twisting of words to suit those who have a vested interest. Finally we have God's message being passed on without ambiguity.

This same relief is evident today when power and authority is used for the manner it was intended. For those who are older, how many times have you worked for a boss who was wishy-washy, always afraid to make a decision or to provide a sense of direction? What a sense of relief when they are replaced by someone who provides that sense of purpose and a reason to belong to an organisation. What a relief when someone is prepared to take a stand and look out for others, rather than feather their own nest.

Those who are younger will also recognise the difference when you are being taught by someone who teaches with authority and confidence rather than someone who is half-hearted in their approach. All of a sudden, there is a sense of confidence that what you are being taught is true. That you are being given information and experience that you can come back to as being right.

If these are examples of authority, where does the authority come from? Proper authority always comes from God. In our Old Testament reading today, the Israelites were waiting to enter the land that God had already promised them through Abraham. God had led his people through the wilderness for forty years under the guidance of Moses. Now the people were preparing to enter the Promised Land and they are warned that the people all around practice magic or they call upon evil spirits. But God's Word tells them that he will raise up for them a prophet like Moses and they must listen to him.

God will be the one who will put words in his mouth. Like Jesus who was to follow, the prophets will speak God's word faithfully and without fear, even if this word is unpopular. The responsibility on the people is to listen to this word because it is from God. This word will be that which keeps people from getting into trouble, from going off the rails. If they don't listen to it, the consequences will be bad.

But this power given to God's prophets is not to be abused. If any prophet presumes to speak in God's name anything he has not said, he must be put to death. Sobering words which highlights the value God not only puts on his word, but also on the danger and hurt abuse of his word causes to innocent people.

Move Three – Using God's authority

In a world which promotes the idea that the individual is the highest authority, hear the good news that it is not *you* but it is God who is the highest authority. And because *all power and authority* comes from him, he has the power to right the wrongs of this world, even when things don't appear to be going our way.

Into the drifting world, God gives you His authority. In a short time we will be installing the new teachers and support staff of our college. Through God's Word, you will be given the proper authority to take responsibility of caring and nurturing for the young people given into your care. Current teachers and staff will be renewed in their authority to teach and care for the students of Peace Lutheran College. Use this authority with care, but also with the confidence of knowing that you stand in your role with God at your side.

This authority from God, given clearly to staff of our college is also given to all members of our congregation. Not over the students of PLC, but in the various situations that God has put you in. If you are a parent, God has given you authority over your child. If you are a boss at work, God has given you authority over those who work for you. If you are a friend, God has given you authority to speak his word of truth *and love* to them. If you are a senior student at PLC, you have been given the authority to care and watch out for those students who look to you for example. Whilst God's authority carries a burden of responsibility, it also brings God's grace and peace to a world that is hurting. Whereas abuse of authority aims to benefit the individual, proper use of authority always serves the community and builds up the body of Christ.

God bless you as you exercise the authority he gives you to speak his word in the time and place he has given you. May he protect you from abusing this power and causing hurt to others.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.