

A couple of weeks ago I was taking my dog out for a walk one morning around the park in Ballyclare, just along the Mill Road. I was walking alongside the river when I spotted a Heron standing perfectly still in the water. Bella our dog loves birds. She's a hunting dog, so she is an inbuilt sense of what to do in these circumstances – she stands perfectly still and watches. Anyway I was standing still also and this Heron was looking into the fast moving river. It was as if time had stopped for me, the dog, and the Heron. And then in a split second, the heron's head dived quickly into the water pulling out this wriggling fish. It was amazing to see it. Now for some of you, you might think, well what's amazing about that – it's just a bird catching a fish, but for me it was truly amazing to see it happen within my own eyes – even Bella seemed impressed.

And yet for many today, it's not that big a deal. And actually, there's something I think about our world these days that really doesn't become that excited about anything. We live in such a tech driven age that the western world probably thinks that anything is possible. After all we put rockets up into space now nearly every week. We have mobile phones that can do more than we could ever imagine 20 years ago. That sense of awe has I think been lost.

I wonder though do you still get awestruck by Jesus? Do we become so used to what we read about Jesus in the scriptures that we become rather blasé about it? I know at times I'm certainly in danger of doing so. We take the love and grace of God for granted. Worship becomes a routine. And suddenly our God who put the very stars in the sky, becomes neatly compartmentalised to suit the busyness of our lives.

And so our story today can seem rather ordinary, unless we re-encounter afresh the awe and authority of Jesus in these words. Our story centres around Jesus going to the synagogue to preach. Nothing out of the ordinary here. Jesus and his disciples go to the place where the Jews gathered for worship. It was just another Sabbath, just another hum-drum service of lessons, a psalm or two, some prayers. Another Sabbath, another song, another visiting rabbi to offer a commentary on Scripture. But Jesus is different to others, isn't he? The people were amazed at his teaching because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. As soon as Jesus sat down and began to teach, the people in that synagogue realized there was something different about not just this teacher, but the teaching he brought.

So the synagogue has a new lease of life, everyone is in good spirits. Well not everyone. You see the truth is that when the word of God is proclaimed faithfully, you can be sure that the devil will raise his ugly head. And so we see that a man with an evil spirit cries out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!"

We don't know anything else about this man, but it makes sense for opposition to break out and to try to stop the power of the Word of God – that's what the devil is all about folks. Now whilst I'm in danger of reading too much into the passage today, it's interesting that we don't read of a similar commotion taking place on previous days in the synagogue. The evil spirit doesn't seem to raise his head any other day. But you see I think that Satan is content to remain quiet in religious gatherings where the Spirit of God is not at work – it's not a threat to him, so he will be very content to lie back and watch people go through the

motions of what I can religiosity. But when confronted with the truth of the gospel – about a God who justifies the ungodly, about a Saviour who carried our every sin to the cross and rose from the dead to guarantee our eternity – when the devil hears that, you'd better believe he's working overtime to divide and destroy, raising up strife so that people walk away from the truth. Whilst I hate to see arguments and splits take place in churches that have previously been thriving and active, it's no surprise that Satan will try to find a way in to destroy it.

So, in answer to the evil spirit's taunts, Jesus rebukes him saying "Be silent, and come out of him!". And it's that incredible authority and command from Jesus that means that the evil spirit must obey.

Now I don't know about you, but if this morning in our services, something like that was to happen, I'm confident that the news would have made its way all-round the town before I would be home for my Sunday lunch. The word 'Exorcisms in Ballyclare' would no doubt be the headline in Newtownabbey Times. Well, here's how the people in Capernaum respond – verse 27 - They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He* commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee'.

Now back to the issue of what amazes us today. I think the danger of reading a passage such as this is to set it in the history of 2000 years ago. And yet what I think is helpful for me as I read this passage is the response from the people is in present tense – 'He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him'. The people were not reflecting on something that had happened earlier that day. They were recognising the power that Jesus has within in now. And so, the same should be for us as we read this, and if it isn't then read it again asking God by his Spirit to amaze you with these words.

Yes Jesus came into the world to destroy the devil's work, but we must be encouraged to believe that Jesus still does it today. That same powerful and authoritative word of Jesus always wins when it's pitted against the noise of the devil, the lies of your sinful nature, or the guilt of your conscience. Be amazed once again by the power of what Jesus is able to do in any situation that you might face in this life. And be amazed with what he can do in a group of people such as us, when we know his authority to cast out all fear. When we come into the place to worship each Sunday, then be expectant, be excited and be ready to be amazed by what God can do in us.

So where do you find yourself on the spectrum of amazement today? Words like "amazing" and "awesome" have kind of lost their power and punch in our modern culture of rapidly advancing technology. But God help us always to stand in awe of our Saviour Jesus, and to see what's really going on here. Every time we gather around his Word, such a celebration points us ahead to the day when the veil of humility will be pulled away and we'll see with our own eyes the glorious power of our God as he destroys the work of the devil forever and brings us to himself in heaven. But until that day comes, stand with your eyes of faith wide open. Stand in awe of your Saviour. He speaks with authority, he works with power, and he does it all for you.