

“JESUS THE TEACHER”

Luke 4:31-37

As we’ve already noted, today is being observed by many churches in Britain as Education Sunday, an opportunity to think about, pray about and be thankful for all those who are involved in our education system. So it seems appropriate that this morning we should spend a few moments reflecting on one of the many aspects of the life and ministry of Jesus that we find described in the Gospels – Jesus as the Teacher.

“*Teacher*” is a title used throughout the Gospel stories by Jesus’ friends and enemies alike. Those who follow him – his disciples and close friends – address him as “*Teacher*”, but his enemies do as well. When the Teachers of the Law and the Pharisees come to ask him questions, they address him as “*Teacher*”. For many people it was really the equivalent of calling him “*Rabbi*” as John points out in *John 1:38*: “*Turning round, Jesus saw [two of John’s disciples] following and asked, ‘What do you want?’ They said, ‘Rabbi’ (which means ‘Teacher’), ‘where are you staying?’*” Indeed, for many people, that was the only aspect of Jesus that they saw – the crowds who heard him give *The Sermon on the Mount*, the people who listened to his preaching in Jerusalem, the folk who were there when he fed the multitudes.

Most of what we have recorded in the Gospels of Jesus’ speech, his interaction with his close followers and with the huge crowds alike, is teaching. And there are many things which we can learn from his technique – as, no doubt, PhD students and jobbing authors alike have discovered. If you put “Jesus The Teacher” into Amazon, you’ll get 75 pages of titles from the simple *Jesus The Teacher* in *The Lion Story Bible*, to

Jesus the Teacher: A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation of Mark and even something called *Neurons of Jesus: Mind of A Teacher, Spouse & Thinker*, would you believe!

But Jesus taught in many ways, driving home his message with all kinds of methods so that his hearers wouldn’t forget it. Of course, he didn’t have at his disposal the many techniques and resources available to us today – PowerPoint, interactive white boards, DVD clips and the like – but he used the spoken word and the many ad hoc visual aids that were around as he stood in the fields and in the Temple precincts to make his message memorable.

Perhaps his best-known technique was **story-telling**. He told stories and parables drawn from the daily experience of his listeners – farmers, people losing things, builders and so on. A story is always a good way to engage people’s attention and to draw them into the message, often with a surprising twist in the

tail at the end which makes it even more likely that they'll remember, as you find in many of Jesus' parables.

He used **visual aids**, referring to the things that his audience could actually see around them – vines, trees, coins and the like. It's always a good idea to try and engage more than one of the senses when you're trying to make a point.

Sometimes the teaching came in the form of a **dialogue** as he engaged with people's questions and queries - the rich ruler asking about eternal life, Peter asking about how many times he should forgive someone. But he also used **questions** himself, questions to which he would often give the answer after he had heard from his disciples.

And, naturally, there were times when he just told them straight – the kind of didactic, **instructional** teaching that we read in *The Sermon on the Mount* or in that final, long section of advice and instruction to his disciples before his arrest that John records in his Gospel. Above all, there was his **example** – Jesus practised what he preached and lived out what he taught. His words would have been empty if they were not demonstrated in his own life.

That's all good pedagogical stuff, isn't it? The teachers among us this morning will probably be nodding along with those points. There is no doubt that Jesus was a great teacher and he is recognised as such by many, many people. Mahatma Gandhi spoke of Jesus as a great teacher – so did John Lennon, Carlos Santana, Voltaire, Fidel Castro and many others who would not otherwise describe themselves as Christians. Jesus is recognised as a great teacher by Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Hindus and many other religions and sects. He is up there with the greatest gurus, prophets and sages that have ever lived. Many people would say that they try to abide by his teachings and what a great piece of instruction *The Sermon on the Mount* is, without having any faith in his ability to redeem, forgive or have any effect beyond the here and now.

C S Lewis famously dealt with that attitude in his classic book *Mere Christianity* when he wrote:

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

You see, in Jesus' teaching there is a great deal that is good common sense, things that we all know we should be doing. But there's a great deal, too, about God and sin and eternal life and the need for repentance and faith which you cannot ignore – as well as the clear assertion that he is the Son of God. There are those who say he is a good teacher, but that all the spiritual stuff is just so much hot air. Well, if Jesus is such a great teacher, you can't pick and choose the bits you like. And you can't try and maintain that, although there's plenty of really good stuff, quite a bit of what he said was untrue or superstitious or misleading, because then he stops being a good teacher and becomes a charlatan or a conman.

And people recognised all that when they first heard him. They thought his teaching was amazing – Luke tells us that twice in the short passage we heard read just now: “*The people were amazed at his teaching*” (v32) and “*All the people were amazed and said to each other, ‘What is this teaching?’*” (v36). I've heard a good few great teachers and preachers in my time and I usually try and work out what it is that makes them so good – technique, personality, insight, originality and so on – in the vain hope that I might one day be able to copy it! Luke tells us here why the people were amazed – and again says it twice. Jesus taught “**with authority**”. In his Gospel Mark actually adds that this was not like the usual teachers they heard (*Mark 1:22*).

Unlike the rabbis the people were used to, unlike the Teacher of the Law and the Pharisees and all the others, Jesus wasn't just regurgitating the same stuff, reinforcing tradition and recycling the usual platitudes and regulations. This was something of a different order completely. Jesus spoke with an authority which came from God. The word that is translated as “*authority*” here (*exousia*) is a word which means power and strength. Jesus' teaching came over with real force, not simply because he was saying stuff they'd never heard before, but because he was saying it in a way that showed he really believed in it and that he was desperate for them to believe it too.

The Department for Education put out a recruitment advertisement at one point – maybe it's still current – which said something along the lines of “*Teaching changes lives*”. That's very true, of course, but it is very true indeed of Jesus' teaching. The power and authority with which Jesus' words came over transformed people. He would say, “*Follow me*” and they would. He would call the demons out of people – as in the passage we've just heard – and they'd come out. Jesus' teaching transforms lives.

There's a British philosopher of language called John Austin (he died in 1960) who is probably best-known for a book entitled *Doing Things With Words*, which any student of hermeneutics will have read. In it, he propounds his theory that we do not just assert things with words, but they actually accomplish things, change things. I'm not going to go into it all this morning (for which you will be very grateful,

I'm sure), but that is what Jesus does. When he speaks, things happen – just as with his Father, who created everything by simply calling it into existence – look at *Genesis 1*.

The God-given authority with which Jesus teaches means that stuff is transformed – demons are driven out, healing is accomplished, fig trees wither, the Devil is despatched, lives are changed. And that authority was backed up by action. Jesus wasn't simply a good speaker – he followed through what he taught all the way to the cross and beyond. There's no point teaching people stuff that you aren't prepared to do yourself or that you don't believe yourself. If Jesus talked about “*turning the other cheek*” or “*loving your enemies*” then he showed in his own life what that meant. If he talked about being obedient to God, then he lived out that obedience through his own actions. If he talked about taking prayer seriously, then he certainly showed what that was all about. If he talked about “*taking up your cross*”, then his ultimate demonstration of authoritative teaching was to go to the cross himself.

Jesus' teaching still comes over with authority. And it still has the power to transform lives. As C S Lewis says, Jesus is not *simply* a great moral teacher. Yes, he is a great moral teacher, but *not simply* that. Jesus the Teacher is someone to listen to, someone to take note of, someone to take seriously. What he says – and the way he actually lived it out himself – can transform your life. Don't ignore Jesus' words. But more importantly, don't listen to Jesus' words and then choose not to accept what he says. His invitation to believe and his call to discipleship are transformative in this life, but the effects will be eternal if you recognise his authority and follow his ways.

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Questions for discussion

- 1) What makes a good teacher? Are there any of your teachers who still stand out (for good reasons)?
- 2) How do you think the people recognised Jesus’ authority? What was there about his teaching to make them say that?
- 3) What’s your view of what C S Lewis said (see below)? Is it valid? Why/why not?
- 4) If someone said to you that they think Jesus is a good teacher but nothing more, what would be your reply?
- 5) What parts of Jesus’ teaching do you especially treasure? Why?

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

C S Lewis: *Mere Christianity*