

# The Voice of Authority

Mark 1:21-28

11<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost

28<sup>th</sup> August 2011

So where is Muammar Gaddafi? Is he still in Tripoli, holed up in some fortified bunker? Or, has he already made his escape to some friendly country such as Venezuela, Qatar or Chad? Or, is he lying on the beach in the south of France, disguised as a tourist? Or, maybe he has used the distraction of the hurricane to sneak into the U.S. to seek out the woman with whom he has reportedly been infatuated for a number of years – Condoleezza Rice.<sup>1</sup> Wherever he is, hopefully, like Osama, it doesn't take us 10 years to find out! I don't think we could stand the suspense!

I rather think, though, that Gaddafi is still close at hand in Tripoli, simply because the man is delusional. For some time now, he has not been able to read the writing on the wall. He has not been able to realise that he is fighting a lost cause. That the game is over. He still thinks that he has a large and loyal following, and that he can make a comeback. All he needs to do is lie low, he believes, wait until the NATO forces and the Libyan rebels get tired and go home. Then he will be in the right place at the right time to make a triumphant return to the acclaim of all his people.

But, of course, this is not going to happen. Gaddafi may have believed in times past that his followers would fight to their final breath and to their last drop of blood. That they would continue their blind loyalty to him just like Hitler's followers who went on fighting a futile war long after it was lost. But as journalist Ben Macintyre says in an article this week, comparing Gaddafi and Hitler, "Gaddafi's closest advisers peeled off to save themselves in a way that Hitler's henchmen never did until he was gone."<sup>2</sup> At the end of the day, unlike those who surrounded Hitler, Gaddafi's loyalists have shown themselves to be supreme realists. They have come to recognise, albeit belatedly, that they are involved in a fight they can't win and that they have to change allegiances to survive in the coming new regime whatever that regime might turn out to be.

Over the past 42 years, Muammar Gaddafi has wielded great authority in Libya. But it has been the authority of force. The authority of terror. The authority of torture. The authority of brutality. "Do what you are told. Follow the party line. Don't rock the boat. Or you know what the consequences will be." Obviously in such a climate of fear, the leader is imbued with great authority. People listen to him. They profess loyalty to him. They tell him that he is the saviour of the nation. They even profess to love him as a great leader.

Now, contrast that kind of authority, for a moment, with the authority of a great leader like Jack Layton whose untimely passing we are mourning this week. He was a man of great authority and influence, not by any means of force or fear, not through coercion or compulsion, but because he

had something that dictators and tyrants will never have. He had the authority of honesty and integrity. The authority of caring and compassion. The authority of selfless service and moral rightness. When Jack Layton spoke, people listened and appreciated what he said. Not because they necessarily agreed with him. Not because he was a Ph.D. in political science or a former professor at Ryerson. Not because he came from a political family or because he had a lifetime's experience in public service. No, people listened to him because of the man he was, because of his inner goodness, because he held high principles and was constantly true to these principles. Yes, Jack Layton had a unique authority that was the envy of many political leaders and, unfortunately, it has taken his death to bring this into proper focus.

It was, of course, the same with Jesus in his time. When he spoke, people listened. When he taught, they paid attention. But not because of his high position. Not because of his academic brilliance. Not because of his political expertise. They listened to Jesus' teaching because of the person he was. Because of his honesty and integrity. Because he not only talked the talk but walked the walk. He backed up his words with deeds of compassion, healing the sick, enabling the disabled and bringing wholeness to those suffering from mental health issues.

So when he taught from the boat on the shore, or in the market place, or in the temple, or during his Sermon on the Mount, his hearers sat up and took notice. For as Mark, the Gospel writer says, "The people who heard him were amazed at the way he taught, for he wasn't like the teachers of the law; instead he taught with authority."<sup>3</sup>

Probably we could sum up the nature of the authority Jesus had among the people of his time by saying that it was the authority of trust. In this itinerant preacher and teacher, the crowds who followed him around intuitively sensed a man whose spiritual and moral character was beyond question. They instinctively knew he was no religious charlatan or medical quack but a man whom, from the evidence of his past record and unimpeachable character, they could trust implicitly and without reservation.

Bishop Willis J. King of the United Methodist Church tells how, many years ago, he was the first African-American to get a Ph.D. in Old Testament in the United States. He felt so proud after graduating from Wiley College. The world was at his feet. There was nothing he could not do. And so he decided he would go down to the local bank and take out a loan of \$500 to buy his first car. The loans officer asked the young man what he had for collateral. "Well," he said, producing a roll of parchment, "I have got my degree." To which the bank official replied, "I'm sorry, sir, but we can't use that as collateral. I'm afraid

we'll have to turn you down.”

As he turned to leave in a dazed state of embarrassment and rejection, King said he suddenly heard a familiar voice. It was his dad. “Son,” he said, “I have come to co-sign your note.” “But, Dad,” he protested, “You can’t even write. All you can make is an ‘X’.” To which the banker replied, “That may be true. Your dad can’t write but it’s that ‘X’ that got the loan to get you into graduate school. And if you are going to buy a car, it’s that same ‘X’ that will do it for you again. Because, you see, it represents a man whom we have come to know and in whom we have absolute trust.”<sup>4</sup>

Trust, then, carries an authority all of its own – exactly the kind of authority that brought people to Jesus in their thousands during the days he walked the shores of Galilee. And even now 21 centuries later, the self-same authority attracts us to this man. Not because it’s a domineering, controlling, do-it-or-else kind of authority. But because it’s the authority of a man we know and trust. A benevolent authority. A life-giving authority. Above all, it’s the authority of love; the authority of one who made the supreme sacrifice of dying on a cross that we might enjoy the life more abundant. It’s an authority which, when accepted, does not bind us with the chains of a passive and mindless compliance, but liberates us to be the people that God intended us to be. As the old hymn says, “Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free.”<sup>5</sup>

The whole matter of authority has, of course, come to be a crucial issue facing the mainline churches during these early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Up until about the 1960s or maybe as far as the 1970s, the church enjoyed a tremendous amount of authority. It spoke and people listened. Its guidance was heeded not just by its members but by people in all sections of society. Today, of course, things have changed. The nature of authority in our society has been redefined. The church, along with all other major institutions, constantly has its moral and spiritual authority questioned. No longer does it have the same influence in people’s lives – and the results are seen in declining attendances and diminishing commitment.

So, how do we rediscover the church’s authority in an anti-institutional, authority-defying society? Some will say we should become more authoritarian. Don’t discuss. Don’t debate. Don’t bother with consensus. Just tell people what they have got to believe and what they should do as Christians. Look at the Roman Catholics, they say. Or, what about the conservative evangelical churches? They have to accept what they are told, no questions asked, and their sanctuaries are full every Sunday.

But, even if that kind of authority were to work, is it really the kind of authority that we in the Presbyterian Church would want to be exercising as a church today? I think not. The authority of Jesus, as we have already seen is not based on any kind of forced compliance or veiled blackmail but on the willing acceptance of one in whose being and actions we believe to the uttermost. The authority

of Jesus is, ultimately, not only the authority of honest or integrity or trust, but it is the authority of love and it is only that kind of authority which people will heed today.

What about us here in St. Paul’s? Do we want our church to have authority and influence in the life of our community today? If so, there is only one way to do this – by reaching out to the people around us, reflecting to them the love of Christ by word and action. Not for any personal gain or to fulfil any political agenda. But simply because we want to serve. For when love speaks, people listen.

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Carvin and Sergey Ponomarev, “Rebels find photos of Gadhafi 'darling' Condoleezza Rice in compound”, Winnipeg Free Press, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2011

<sup>2</sup> Ben Macintyre, “Hitler, master of the futile fight to the end”, *The Times*, London, UK, 23 August 2011

<sup>3</sup> Mark 1:22

<sup>4</sup> Zan Holmes, *New World Outlook*, July 8, 1993, quoted by Glen Harris, *LectionAid*, Jan - Mar, 1997, p.23

<sup>5</sup> “Make me a captive, Lord”, George Matheson (1842-1906), *Hymns of Faith*, Scripture Union Press, 1964, #297