

One of the biggest problems we face as Christians today is trying to figure out who Jesus really is. Years ago this was not as much of a problem because we lived in a culture where there were always people in our lives who could give us guidance. Grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts and uncles, but also neighbors and friends – we were surrounded by people who would spend time to help answer our questions, no matter how tiresome and tedious those questions got to be.

Now, however, it seems that too many of us are left to our own devices to try and figure out what life and faith are all about and how we can best deal with our questions of faith.

For example, I often find myself meeting with parents in the course of a pre-baptismal conference and hear them say things about their own children's religious instruction like, "Well, we don't plan to push too hard about the church. When my child is old enough he can then make up his own mind."

I want to suggest that this is just about the dumbest thing I can imagine a parent saying. Giving children a firm foundation in the Christian faith, a well-developed sense of right and wrong, and giving them a purpose, meaning, and value for their lives is just as important as the ability to read and write or to have straight teeth. Have you ever heard of parents letting children decide each day whether they will attend school or not? Of course not. Neither have I.

I recently read about a community that sponsored a city-wide convocation on the moral implications of sexuality education in the schools. What is the school system to do about educating young people on issues formerly handled at home and church? Our society has trouble deciding who is to be responsible for the upbringing of its children. Authority is eroding everywhere – politicians, schools, churches, and in the home. Few adults feel qualified to speak today to others about anything in the realm of value and meaning.

We have come a long way from the days when, as a society, we valued authority and had a common frame of reference for the values we taught our children. Today it is every person for him- or herself – even the children of our community. We have bent over backwards so far to avoid being *authoritarian* that we have lost *authority* – and there is a big difference between the two.

You see, *authority* is not always a bad word. If you look closely at the Bible and its texts you will see that authority is vital to us. We all need an authoritative center to hold together the fabric of society. The Bible has served us well in this regard for nearly 2,000 years, and although we may sometimes disagree on fine points of interpretation, we at least have the Scripture as a common point of departure for our conversation together as Christians. Our Gospel for today is essentially the beginning point for understanding who Jesus is and why the authority of Jesus is important.

As we consider Mark's telling of this pivotal event, the baptism of Jesus, we do well to keep in mind an important point. To wit: Mark is much more to the point, much more succinct, than the other gospels. He does not waste words relating irrelevant points. For example, he does not portray the argument between John and Jesus that Matthew mentions in his version of this story. And, unlike Luke, who offers several interesting details – Jesus was praying, for example – Mark gets right to the heart of the matter.

Mark tells us right off the bat that when John came it was to proclaim a specific message to the people. We are not sure whether it was before, during, or immediately after their baptisms, but whenever it was, John's message provoked a particular, specific response – confession. Those who confessed their sins had the opportunity for forgiveness and the possibility to begin life anew.

Now think for a moment what this means in terms of Mark's point in telling this story: Mark relates the coming of Jesus directly to the message of John – and his coming, like John's baptism, had everything to do with repentance, forgiveness, and new life. When, in our modern propensity for re-imagining Jesus we separate these two realities we miss an important point about the authority with which Jesus came. He came with the authority to forgive sins – and forgiveness cannot happen without repentance.

That's the first thing.

The second part of the story tells us who John the Baptist is – but again, who that directly relates to the authority of the Messiah. John is the one who announces the Messiah, but he is not the one who has the authority *of* the Messiah: It is the coming Messiah who has the authority to baptize with the Holy Spirit.

This part of our reading suggests that when Jesus came to be baptized by John in the Jordan River, Jesus "saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove

on him. And a voice came from heaven, doing what? Proclaiming his authority: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (*Mark 1:10–11*).

It seems that only Jesus, and, by extension, the readers of Mark’s Gospel, hear the voice. But that does not diminish the significance of what the voice says. When the voice says, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased,” we hear the same fundamental message that would later be proclaimed to Peter, James, and John (speaking of Jesus) on the Mount of Transfiguration: “This is my beloved Son, listen to him.” (*Mark 9:7*) Interestingly, this is not the last time Mark writes of “the heavens [being] torn apart,” for at the end of his gospel we see it in another form once again: “And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.” (*Mark 15:38*) Mark’s obscure reference to the tearing of heavens and the tearing of the temple curtain are clues to the significance and might of the Jesus sent by God. Heaven and earth reveal the authority of this Messiah.

What does this mean for us?

Some might be put off by this word authority, but I find in it something else entirely. I find the authority of Jesus a source of hope-filled perspective for what it means to be part of the community of faith into which we are baptized. By being God’s baptized ones today, we accept the authority of Jesus as the defining authority for our way of life. And just as Jesus was baptized as a sign of his solidarity with those who would accept his authority, so baptism is, for us, a sign of our solidarity with Jesus. This has tremendous implications for how we are called to live out our Christian ministry.

Alan Jones, for many years the dean of San Francisco’s Grace Cathedral, in a book about desert spirituality, writes about what it means to accept the authority of Christ. Jones essentially says this: ***The path of discipleship is the trek toward the cross.*** If we are to walk with Christ, we must answer the question, where is Christ taking me? And we can’t know where Christ is taking us until we let ourselves come to grips with who Jesus is and why Jesus came to be God Incarnate in the first place. Wimpy, half-baked “cute little fuzz-ball Jesus” answers simply will not suffice.

Now, look around you at the children who are in our midst:

- Trinity Church: Keegan; young Evelyn, baptized last week; Rusty’s grandson, Brendan; Bob’s grandson, Andrew
- Christ Church: Elizabeth and Grace, Patrick, Colin, Griffin

Who is going to tell them who Jesus is? **You are.** And if we are going to tell them, we'd better consider for our own selves who we understand Jesus to be.

If there is any task we are called to take on by virtue of our baptism, it is to tell these young people and others in our community, young or old, who Jesus is. But in order to do that we must first attend to our first task of getting back to what I'm going to call the Marcan basics. We need to rediscover for ourselves the authority of Jesus. And Mark's Gospel puts it plainly from beginning to end. His authority is nothing less than this: "[Jesus is God's] Son, the Beloved; with [him God is] well pleased. (*Mark 1:11*) I can think of no authority greater – or of more significance – than that.