

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

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.

REFLECTION 1: A DAY IN THE LIFE OF JESUS

After having recorded the call of the first four 'fishers of men', the Evangelist Mark shows how Jesus, in company with his disciples, went about his mission. So, Mark for the next few Sundays (4th to 6th Sundays in Ordinary Time) presents the activities of one day in the ministry of Jesus. Today the Fourth Sunday, he teaches in the synagogue at Capernaum one Sabbath afternoon and frees a man from an unclean Spirit that is tormenting him (Mark 1:21-28). After the service, Jesus goes to the house of Simon and Andrew, where he cures Simon's mother-in-law, who is 'in bed with fever'. Then, 'when it was evening after sunset', he cures many sick persons and expels many demons. On the following day, 'rising very early before dawn', he goes to a deserted place to pray. Afterwards he walks 'throughout the whole of Galilee', teaching in the synagogues and driving out demons (5th Sunday). Jesus then cures a leper (6th Sunday). Typically, Jesus' routine was composed of prayer, teaching and healing. So the next three Sundays make up a unit, a sequence, a 'day in the life...'

Mark Link, a Jesuit writer maintains that the movie *The Exorcist* is based on a true story of a boy from Maryland, USA. Newsweek wrote of the boy 'After he was admitted to Georgetown University Hospital the boy began to utter fierce curses in ancient languages and at one point, while strapped helplessly in his bed, long scratches appeared on his body'. The boy survived and now lives near Washington D.C. This true story recalls how Jesus expelled evil spirits – a sign that God's kingdom was replacing Satan's kingdom. The man in today's Gospel created a disturbance and Jesus healed him. The Jews and indeed the whole ancient world believed strongly in demons and devils. In many ancient cemeteries skulls are found today which have been trepanned. That is to say, a hole has been bored into the skull to allow the demon to escape from the body of the man or woman. So, the belief in demon possession must have been intensely real. However, it does not matter whether we believe all this, whether it is true or not is not the point. The fact is that the people of New Testament times did. Some also believed that Jesus was the Messiah and that the reign of the Messiah would put an end to demons. Jesus with one word of clear, simple and brief authority exorcised the demon from the man. No one had ever seen anything like this before. The power was not in the spell, the formula of words, 'Be quiet and come out of the man'. Rather, the power was in Jesus and all the onlookers were astonished. The fact is that Jesus took on himself the reality of the disease. It was real to the man possessed and had to be treated as such.

First among the signs of miracles worked by Jesus, according to Mark, the exorcism of the demon is more than an act of kindness to a tortured soul. Indeed, through this action, the gauntlet has been flung down and the battle between good and evil begins. This battle will be waged fiercely and will culminate with the victory of Jesus that appears to be a defeat, his sacrificial death on a cross. There Jesus will ultimately conquer evil, sin and death and be declared openly as the Son of God.

REFLECTION 2:

BREAKING NEWS

The movie that best reflects the horrors of World War 1 is without doubt 'All Quiet on the Western Front'. It's a portrait of several young recruits from the same class at school who joined the German Army. It also portrays two other men – a corporal Himmelstead and a battle-hardened veteran Kael. The corporal could only command authority by pointing to his stripes of rank and a ranting voice, while Kael, much loved by the troops commands real authority by his wisdom and kindness.

In the first reading today from the Book of Deuteronomy, the sacred author calls on the authority of the people's late great leader Moses to promise the people that God would send them a prophet. The coming prophet, one like Moses, should be carefully heeded for his words would be from God – a source of hope for his people. Someone would be sent by God to lead them in the ways of truth, justice and peace.

In today's Gospel, Mark takes special care to portray Jesus as one who spoke and acted with authority. But Jesus' authority was not derived from someone else. Unlike the scribes who call on the scriptures and scholars, Jesus possesses authority that was his always by virtue of who he was. Indeed, Mark makes Jesus' authority clear to his readers from the beginning. In Mark Chapter One, Verse One, we read, 'Here begins the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. While Jesus' contemporaries and disciples often appear to be uncertain about his identity, only as he hung on the cross did the centurion exclaim, 'Surely this man was the Son of God' (Mark 15: 39). Mark kept his readers in the know by including in his Gospel, little glimpses of Jesus Son of God. The first glimpse comes at Jesus' baptism. Another glimpse is offered in today's Gospel reading when Jesus is recognised and acclaimed as 'The Holy One of God'. Besides teaching with authority Jesus also acted with authority proving that he, as Son of God, was more powerful than any evil spirit. We who are called to follow Jesus are also beckoned to enjoy a share in his authority. When we speak and act and do all things in his name, ours is an authority derived from his. However, Pope Francis tells us that if we use that authority unworthily to press for power, wealth and control over others, then our authority is not true, nor does it reflect our belonging to Jesus. But how do we achieve a proper balance?

Perhaps we can take a cue from the people in the synagogue in Capernaum so long ago. They recognised that Jesus was offering them 'a new teaching with authority'. They were simple and humble enough to be astonished. In their amazement at what they had seen and heard, they also acknowledged Jesus' power over evil and unclean spirits. And in the aftermath of that event, they talked about Jesus; they were his witnesses throughout all of Galilee.

Each time we hear the Gospel proclaimed it is 'breaking news' deserving of our attention and respect. But that news also comes with a challenge. Will we just listen and then go away unchanged, or will we listen and learn to be transformed by its power, grace and authority?