

4TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, B
TEACHING WITH AUTHORITY

“Here is a teaching that is new and with authority behind it: He gives orders even to unclean spirits and they obey Him” (Mk. 1: 27).

On this Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, we reflect on the first miracle of Jesus according to Mark’s Gospel. After the choice of His first four disciples (Mk. 1: 16-20), which we listened to last week, Jesus set off on His mission. St. Mark today describes what would be a typical day in the life of Jesus for the next three years of His ministry. He goes to the town of Capernaum, a small fishing village by the sea of Galilee. Capernaum will become the “home” of Jesus for the next few years. According to Mark, Capernaum was the hometown of at least two disciples (Mk. 1: 29) and so, Jesus made that His pastoral home (Mk. 2: 1). He goes into the synagogue, as He will be doing regularly, on the Sabbath and teaches there. The synagogue was a very influential institution in Jewish life. Almost every town had its synagogue for the faithful to gather for communal prayers, reading and instructions on the Law and the prophets. It was the custom to invite anyone conversant with the Scripture to teach there. Jesus seizes this opportunity to deliver His messages. The journey of Jesus to the synagogues and the temple in Jerusalem is always marred by controversies, oppositions, accusations; and will culminate in death.

“And His teaching made a deep impression on them”: The people who listened to Jesus on this occasion were “astonished.” In Mark’s gospel, there is repeated emphasis on the effect or impression that the teachings and actions of Jesus have on His audience – the astonishment, the awe and the amazement (Mk. 6: 2; 7: 37; 10: 26; 11: 18). They were overwhelmed because “He taught them with authority.” Unlike the scribes, who were exponents of the Law and the prophets, and taught only from notional knowledge, Jesus’ teaching is revealing, personal, compassionate and with clear evidence of authority as one who has greater power beyond what they had ever seen. The teaching of Jesus reveals the deeper meanings of the Scripture in such ways that instead of the Law being a burden, as the scribes made it out to be; Jesus presents the Law as an instrument of service to man as when He teaches: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (M. 2: 27-28).

“In their synagogue just then there was a man possessed by an unclean spirit”: It is interesting that in Mark’s gospel, the first miracle of Jesus is the deliverance of a man possessed by “unclean spirit.” This underscores the primacy Mark gives to

Jesus as The One Who has come with authority and power to deliver man from the kingdom of darkness and set humanity free from the clutches of Satan. This was one of the features of the Messiah as prophesied by Isaiah: “to set the captives free” (Is. 61: 1-3). From the outset, Mark, whose writing was primarily for the persecuted Christians of Rome, demonstrates Jesus’ power over the forces of darkness to give them hope that God’s Son has authority, even over their persecutors too and will deliver them from their captors. Such confidence is necessary for us at this time that we seem to be “captives” under the scourge of coronavirus. We shall surely be delivered from this. The prevalence of evil spirit, unclean spirit and demons (all used interchangeably in the gospel) was a common phenomenon among the Jews of Jesus’ time. These demons are still at work in our day, even though science, psychology, philosophy and technological advancement have altered most of our perceptions. Many do not even believe in the existence of these spirits and do not understand how they could possess, disfigure and manipulate human beings. It has to be noted that what we believe does not alter the truth of the factual existence of spiritual forces in the world. As Christians, convinced of the duality of cosmic forces of light and darkness, good and evil, life and death, we know that Christ came to set us free from the dominion of darkness and usher us into the kingdom of His wonderful light.

Knowledge of Jesus: The man with unclean spirit shouts 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.” Surprising indeed that the unclean spirit could recognise the true identity of Jesus. His disciples will not know this until after his Resurrection. Do we know Jesus? I mean Who is He to you? The unclean spirit also acknowledges the power Jesus has over it. Are we aware of the power Jesus has over us? Do we acknowledge that and surrender to Him? Knowing Jesus to the point of establishing a relationship with Him requires change, discipline and detachment from the world as St. Paul articulates in the Second Reading (1 Cor. 7: 29-31).

“Be quiet! Come out of him”: Jesus’ reaction to this confrontation is the issuance of a command. His words have an immediate and direct impact: “the unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions and with a loud cry went out of him.” The people are astonished because they have never seen anything like this. “Here is a teaching that is new and with authority behind it: He gives orders even to unclean spirits and they obey Him.” The ordinary Jewish exorcists used long twisting incantations, spells and magical rites to perform anything close to this. Jesus rather speaks simply, giving the demon a command which it obeys. Here, the power is not in the incantation, or the spell or the rites; but the power is in the Person of Jesus. The

apostles will invoke His name to perform miracles, as at The Beautiful Gate Peter heals the lame man saying: "I have neither silver nor gold, but what I have I give you: in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, stand up and walk" (Acts 3: 6). At His name every knee shall bend (Phil. 2: 10-11) and in this Name is our salvation (Acts 4: 12). ***My dear friends,*** Jesus is our True Teacher. He teaches with authority and His Words have power. But intrinsic in His power and authority is compassion that makes Him stoop down to feel the weakness of our humanity; the love that makes Him save and deliver us from all forces of domination and destruction. We need to grow in the love of the Person and Name of Jesus. God has given us His Only Begotten Son so that whoever believes in Him will be saved (Jn. 3: 16). St. Paul cautions us that "our time is growing short ... and the world as we know it is passing by" (1 Cor. 7: 29, 31). Now is the only time we have got to establish, renew and restore our bond with Jesus. May the grace of God be sufficient for us.

