

Ordinary Sunday 4B - Septuagesima

A teaching with authority behind it

Today's Gospel (Mark 1:21-28) describes the first public act of Jesus in Mark's Gospel; his teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum, in the course of which he dramatically frees a man possessed by an evil spirit. Power and Authority usually go together, but are often confused. If Jesus exercised authority it was not in the oppressive fashion of many earthly rulers but in the service of those in need. **His power was directed towards liberating people from unjust laws, evil spirits, debilitating illness, and the slavery of sin.** It is this power that is at work in us when we yield to the Spirit of the one true God.

The English writer and wit, G.K. Chesterton, during one of his literary lunches, was expounding on the relationship between power and authority. He described the difference: *"If a rhinoceros were to enter this restaurant now, there is no denying he would have great power here. But I should be the first to rise and assure him that he had no authority whatsoever."* Power without authority is always dangerous while authority without power is comical. Power is the ability to cause or prevent change, to influence people and events, it is important that those who exercise it also enjoy the authority that justifies them, in what they do. For many people in our world, who have suffered under various powerful regimes, power is associated with force, compulsion, and violence. Given there have been many regimes that have abused their power, both power and authority have gathered negative connotations. The power that identifies itself only with force, makes victims of all its subjects. That is the power of Chesterton's rhinoceros. People rightly should oppose this type of power that exploits, manipulates, and bullies into conformity.

However, power and authority need not be destructive. We remember how Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Archbishop Romero, influenced by Christ, used the power of nonviolence to oppose unjust and powerful systems. The fact that all of these figures were assassinated did not belittle their power: their moral authority, exercised on behalf of a suffering people, made them forces for good.

In Jesus Christ, both power and authority find their finest expression. If anyone desires to learn how to use power and authority they need to first sit down and study Christ. Real power is strength in control. When the evangelist Mark begins telling his story of the ministry of Jesus, he shows us how Jesus is invested with the power of the Holy Spirit at his baptism and thus acts with proper God-given authority. The power that moves Jesus has its source in God; the authority that Jesus displays, both in his actions and words, is the authority of God himself. When Jesus begins his teachings, the people are deeply impressed; they can see for themselves the difference between how Jesus teaches and how other religious leaders teach. When Jesus teaches and preaches something actually happens and they are more than mere words that decorate the air. The evangelist presents Jesus as one who teaches with great authority; since he is the prophet promised by God to Moses that we heard in our first reading.

In the First Reading (Deut 18:15-20) Moses assures the Israelites that his own departure from the scene would not mean that they would lack means of receiving messages and instruction from God. God would raise up a prophet like himself, to whose Words they should attentively listen. The later Jewish tradition understood this promise in a messianic sense and looked for a 'Moses-like' prophet who would come at the end of the age. Jesus' appearance and teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum represents one instance of his fulfilling this role, though on a vastly higher scale than Moses.

Back in our Gospel story, we see there is a confrontation between the Power of God and the much lesser power of Satan. While Jesus is teaching in the synagogue he is interrupted by the shouts of a man possessed, a man who has no authority over his body or spirit. He is possessed; thus not in charge of his own life. Jesus commanded the dark power that dominated this man's life to leave him alone. **At Jesus' command, his power and authority the man is freed!** This is the proper use of power and authority. God uses his power and authority to set us free, to build us up, to bring us into the fullness of life, to heal us in mind – body - and spirit! Anyone sharing in this legitimate, God-given power and authority is to do the same. Jesus continued to use his unique authority throughout the gospels to liberate people from evil forces that dominated their lives. This is the particular calling of all who exercise Christian leadership in the Church.

For Jesus, to be ignorant or wrong about God is just as much a captivity as the various other captivities that the ancient worldview attributed to demonic possession – many of which we would now attribute to pathological psychological conditions, which Jesus could have healed just the same. Jesus' message and the authority with which he proclaimed it was new with the 'newness' of creation. The Lord communicated a sense of a fresh start in life, beginning with a renewed relationship with God, freely offered in love.

The dramatic liberation of the demon-possessed man before the eyes of all in the synagogue was not, then, unconnected with Jesus' teaching. It simply enacted a liberation that was going on within all present as they listened to Jesus and drank in his words. 'Captivities' of prejudice, fears, scruples, guilts, and

ignorance about God, were dragged out of them. It is not just a demon that was cast out of one man; the demonic can refer to any condition that controls human lives, inhibiting freedom and choice, stunting personal growth, alienating persons from God and their true humanity, rendering relationships with others poisonous or destructive; addictions of all kinds, their destructiveness symbolized in the 'convulsions' inflicted on the man in this scene by the demon as it left him. Rather than being mere spectators of what is being described, the Gospel invites those who hear it to identify with Jesus' audience in the synagogue and to consider how their own lives need to be set free through the power and authority of the teachings of Jesus. *What do we need to be set free from? As we know, we all have little demons running around in our minds as we battle with life, what's happening in our world, and other anxieties and pressures.*

Our first parents rebelled against the legitimate authority and power of God and sinned. Throughout the centuries humanity has rebelled against God's legitimate power and authority and created all sorts of disasters. This is our fallen nature. The Christian Saint is a person who has understood this, surrendered his or her life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and begun a process of healing, forgiveness, and sanctification. If we follow this path, we too will be given real power and authority for the good, to liberate those who are bound up and confront those who lay burdens. No matter what the opinion polls say we can carry on, applause or no applause. Ultimately, as Jesus was, we are responsible to the Father, from whom all legitimate power and authority come. So, let us first surrender all aspects of our lives to the power and authority of God in Jesus, and then exercise our Christian authority and power for the good and building up of God's kingdom.