

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time + 28 January 2024 + Deut 18:15-20 + Mark 1:21-28

There are two topics from our Gospel today that I'd like to focus on: authority, and exorcisms. As we shall see, they are very much related to each other. But first, authority. It is a basic human desire, in my opinion, to have someone among us who can speak to us with authority. Even those who despise authority always seek to condemn it with, well, authority. Sadly, we don't have many authoritative voices these days. With the advent of social media, it seems everyone wants to be an authority. Everyone is an expert. But if everyone is an authority, no one is an authority. And as a result, confusion and hopelessness reigns. Deep down, we all want to hear a voice that speaks the truth, with authority. We see this reality in our 1st reading from the book of Deuteronomy.

So to begin, recall that for the People of Israel, Moses was not just like a US president. Rather, he was their high priest, their prophet, and their king. He spoke with authority, because he spoke face-to-face with God almighty. In our 1st reading today, we hear him prophesy that someone will come after him who will be a prophet just like himself, speaking God's own words. And yet for centuries, this prophecy seemed to be unfulfilled. Certainly there were many prophets after the time of Moses: Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and so on. But none of these latter prophets had as direct of a relationship with God, so to speak, as Moses did. No one carried as much authoritative weight as Moses.

So now fast-forward to our Gospel today, where we hear: *the people were astonished at [Jesus'] teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes*. Now the scribes were only teachers. They themselves had been trained by other teachers. They sought to interpret the teachings of Moses for the people. But none of them would even dream to claim equality with Moses. All of that changed, however, when Jesus began to teach. Now notice here that Jesus doesn't make any claims to authority. Rather, the very manner in which He taught—that is, His *very presence* indicated something was different about Him. Interestingly, the Greek word for *authority*, *exousian*, means literally, *from himself*. Meaning, Jesus' teaching authority comes *from himself*; from His very being. As we shall see, Jesus' authority is the nothing less than the authority of God Himself, thus fulfilling the unanswered prophecy of Moses in our 1st reading today.

As if to prove this claim, we also hear how Jesus' *words* are not just true, but they have power! In this case, the power to drive out an unclean spirit. Interestingly, it is the unclean spirit who reveals who Jesus is: *I know who you are, he says, the Holy One of God!* Now, there has been an unfortunate tendency in Scriptural studies for the last 100 years or so to downplay the supernatural. The standard line went like this: ancient peoples, like those in Biblical times, did not have scientific knowledge, so they attributed everything they didn't understand to the spirit world. So the demonic possessions we hear of in Scripture are really just things like mental illness, epilepsy, and so on. What are we to make of this?

Well, it is quite likely that this sort of thing did happen from time to time. However, we cannot, and should not, simply dismiss the spirit world off-hand. The Church has always believed that just as there are good created beings that are pure-spirit, which we call angels, there are also fallen, evil spirits, which we call demons. And just as we call upon the intercession and assistance of our good guardian angels, we also have to be aware that evil spirits have more or less impact on our lives as well. It is also very important to note here that evil spirits only have the degree of influence which we allow them. People can often go to extremes here. Some ignore the influence of the devil and his fallen angels, and fail to recognize the grave danger of dabbling in the occult: things like ouija boards, magic, mediums, and so on. Others fear that demons are around every dark corner. Suffice it to say that the Lord has infinite power over satan and his fallen angels, and so long as we stay close to Him and seek to live in a state of grace, we do not need to fear.

And this is really the key: that Jesus has authority over sin and satan. Remember, we are at the very beginning of Mark's Gospel, and so Jesus' identity at this point is still a mystery. So by revealing His authority to speak on behalf of God and to cast out unclean spirits, He is foreshadowing His ultimate authority to forgive sins, and thus authority over the effects of sin; that is, His authority over death. And so every exorcism we hear of in the Gospels is like a mini-resurrection, a new lease on human life, that is pointing toward a far greater resurrection to eternal life.

So what does this mean for us today? Well, I think there are two main takeaways. First, if Jesus truly speaks with the authority of God as God, then we need to listen to Him! God's warning to the People of Israel applies equally to us today as well: *Whoever will not listen to my words which [the prophet] speaks in my name, I myself will make him answer for it.* To be a Christian is an tremendous gift, yes, but it is also a profound responsibility. We know the truth: we have God's Word in Scripture, which is interpreted to us with the authority of our Catholic Tradition. But do we have hearts open to hear it and live by it? This is why our Psalm today also warns us: *If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts!*

Next, we need to have a healthy, faith-filled sense of the natural and the supernatural. We certainly recognize the reality of bodily and mental illnesses, unjust laws, and natural disasters. But we also recognize the reality of sin, both individual and collective, is real. There is something deeply, deadly wrong in the human heart. The devil is real, as are his fallen angels, and they hate us with a vengeance. If we can't accept this reality, we won't understand just how good the Good News is. We won't really understand Who Jesus is, or His power over sin and satan, or why He went to such unimaginable depths to save us. We won't appreciate how life-giving God's Word and the Sacraments are. And we won't know that through Baptism and the Holy Spirit, we share in the very authority of Jesus Christ over sin and death, and so we have nothing to fear both now and in eternity!