

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 4th SUNDAY (B)

Deuteronomy 18: 15-20 Psalm 95 1Corinthians 7: 32-35 Mark 1: 21-28

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Mark's gospel is rushing along. We are still only in the first chapter and today we have two accounts of Jesus' ministry – his teaching in the synagogue and an exorcism. The exorcism has spectacle about it and draws our attention but, judging from the opening and closing of the passage, it doesn't seem to be the focus of the story. Instead, Mark refers us to Jesus' teaching. The exorcism underlines his authority to teach. The crowds confirm this emphasis, for we are told they were "astounding at his teaching," because he taught as "one having authority and not as the scribes."

In Deuteronomy Moses promised, "A prophet like me will the Lord your God raise up for you among your kin, to him you shall listen." God did just that, sent prophets to reveal God's will and presence to the people. The prophets who preceded Jesus spoke in God's name, "Thus says the Lord..." But Jesus speaks from his own authority, "I say to you..." What the disciples would realize, after Jesus' resurrection, was that he was even greater than Moses or any of the prophets. He was not merely a voice for God; he was the presence of the Holy One in their midst. And more. Jesus' powerful presence would not be taken away or leave them, even after his death. His resurrection would open their eyes to who he was and who he would continue to be for them. They would remember his words, spoken with authority and authenticated by powerful signs and they would place their confidence in his presence with them as they went forth to preach his word.

In their teaching the scribes would have drawn on past teachers and commentators. They wouldn't have claimed their own authority. Thus, the crowd is amazed because Jesus didn't rely on anyone else's authority when he taught, he spoke "as one having authority." How would the people know that Jesus had any right to speak from his own authority? To show that he did, he drove out an evil spirit. When people observed this they could then put trust in what he taught,

Previously, John the Baptist promised that one more powerful than he (1:17) was coming. Today's story, and Mark's gospel itself, reveal the fulfillment of John's promise. Jesus has entered a world where evil seems to have the upper hand and

humanity, like the possessed man in the synagogue, is helpless against such power. Evil works against God's good intentions for us. A "mighty one," who can subdue the powers of evil, is needed. Jesus enters the scene and, as we see in Mark's breathless gospel, he quickly goes about his mission: he confronts and casts out the various guises of evil which oppress people and even attack his own disciples (8:33). He does battle against sin, sickness, falsehood, greed and the power of death itself.

People have waited a long time for God to come to their aid and Jesus' teachings and power reveal that God has arrived to enable them to resist and overcome evil. The exorcism is visible proof of God's very present power. Jesus also wants to restore people to the community and one example of this is the exorcism. A person who exhibited such bizarre behavior would have been considered possessed of an evil spirit. Hence, they were barred from the synagogue, for the very reason we see in today's story – they would be disruptive to the order of the community. Jesus used his authority, not to cast the man from the synagogue, but to drive out the source of the disruption. He is restoring to order and health what evil has upset. Jesus is putting flesh on what he proclaimed last week, "This is the time of fulfillment, the kingdom of God is at hand."

We aren't merely looking back on Jesus' authoritative words and being inspired by them. Through his resurrection he is present with us now, still speaking and acting with an authority that overcomes evil. I write this on the weekend of Martin Luther King Jr's holiday. (It is also a few days before the inauguration of our first black president.) We hear in King's preaching words of hope to people who lived over four decades ago – and today. He spoke to our past, but he speaks to our present and future as well, as he draws on Jesus' authority and challenges us to live lives based on equality, non-violence and love – even for our enemies. His life and words show us just how powerful Jesus' words are as they strengthen us in our present and future struggles against the evils that would fragment the human community into competitive and combative factions.

King says, as he once did in Montgomery, Alabama:

"I know you are asking today, 'How long will it take?' I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth crushed to earth will rise again.

How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever.

How long? Not long, because you will reap, what you sow.

How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice

How long? Not long, because mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord....”

[watch and listen to his speech:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAYITODNvIM&feature=Playlist&p=41CE8E34D7DE51A6&index=5>]

In the voices of such modern-day prophets as M. L. King, you can hear the authoritative voice of the One who stood up in the synagogue to teach and whose words could drive out evil. Such power and authority were reflected in King’s words as he confronted war, racism, violence and injustice and his words still help us in our ongoing struggle to drive out these unclean spirits.

Whose has authority over our lives? Whose words and actions have the power to sway us and call us to righteous living? Who influences our conscience enough to cause us to change our ways and take up life in God’s reign? Who gives us perspective and lens through which to look out at our world and helps us find the good and reject the evil? For Christians, Jesus’ words have such authority for us.

We have confidence in his words and trust he will be faithful to us as he sends us modern prophets to help us teach by our words and example. Indeed, regular reflection on Jesus’ teachings can shape us; help us resist evil and turn towards the good for, as the crowds acknowledged that day Jesus taught in the synagogue – his teaching has authority.

QUOTABLE

“What has Jesus to do with me, anyway?” we might ask. “Surely my agenda is more important than what God or the good of the community would have in mind.”

We may worry that our very individuality might be crushed under the weight of this Jesus. “Have you come to destroy us?” Yet this Jesus is no threat, even in our most obstinate and stubborn moments. Our community is no threat, if we see an encounter with others as an opportunity to serve in mutual obedience.

—page 172, LIFT UP YOUR HEARTS, (cf. Below).

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"I will raise up for them a prophet...and will put my words into his mouth; he shall tell them all that I command him."

1. *(Deuteronomy 18:15-20)*

God raises up prophets in every age. Their message has always been the same. "You have forgotten the poor", and because of that, you have forgotten who your God is. Prophets show us that we have created idols to take the place of our God. These idols have many names: power, success, affluence, and security. We do not like to be reminded of painful truths. And so the message of the prophets is never a popular message, and they, like Jesus or Oscar Romero the Archbishop of El Salvador, or Martin Luther King are most often first ignored, then banished or put to death.

The truth is that we are all called to be prophets to each other. We are called to remind each other who our God is by the choices we make and the lives we lead. We are, in the words of Oscar Romero, not called to be messiahs, but servants of one another.

Prophets of a Future Not Our Own

"It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts; it is beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. No thing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about: we plant seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are *workers*, not master builders, *ministers*, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own. Amen”

(Archbishop Oscar Romero)

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. “Faith Book” is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today’s Gospel reading:

“The people were astonished at Jesus’ teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.”

Reflection:

We have confidence in Jesus’ words. We trust he will continue to be faithful to us as he sends us modern prophets to teach his ways by our words and example. Indeed, regular reflection on Jesus’ teachings can shape us; help us resist evil and turn towards the good for, as the crowds acknowledged that day Jesus taught in the synagogue – his teaching has authority.

So, we ask ourselves:

- Whose has authority over our lives?
- Whose words and actions have the power to sway us and call us to righteous living?
- Who gives us perspective and lens through which to look out at our world and helps us find the good and reject the evil?

For Christians, Jesus’ words have such authority for us.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

James A. Wallace, CSSR, Robert P. Waznak, SS, and Guerric De Bona, OSB,

LIFT UP YOUR HEARTS: HOMILIES AND REFLECTIONS FOR THE “B” CYCLE. (New York: Paulist Press, 2006.) Paper, ISBN 0-8091-4368-2

A very good collection of homilies for this liturgical year, with reflective questions and additional suggestions for each preaching. As the cover says, “Not just for preachers.”

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates’ names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, “People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.” If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

- Clinton R. Rose #0351933 (On death row since 12/19/91)
- Edward E. Davis #0100579 (3/12/92)
- Kenneth B. Rouse #0353186 (3/25/92)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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