

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The people were astonished at Jesus' teaching because, unlike the scribes, he taught them as one having authority... "Here is a teaching that is new", they said, "and with authority behind it: he gives orders to unclean spirits and they obey him."

Mark 1, 21-28



Good TEACHING is all about:

• **BEING**

Who you are!

• **VALUING**

What you believe and value!

• **DOING**

What you do with your kids (or adults)! AND (more importantly) where you "allow" them to go!

Before you launch into reading the remainder of this reflection, I invite you to reflect for a few minutes on your schooldays. Who are the teachers you recall with gratitude and affection? Who are the ones whom you disliked or who frightened you? Focussing on the ones you liked, see if you can recall what it was about them or their teaching that was attractive to you?

I want to suggest that the teachers with whom you flourished were women and men who knew the real meaning of authority and who used the authority vested in them to breathe life into their students. In your case, they were people who trusted you, who encouraged you, who helped you to recognize your talents, who made you feel good about yourself. They actually "authored" you into life.

An excursion into a dictionary of etymology will show clearly the links between "author" and "authority". The literal meaning of the word "author" is "one who causes growth". People in positions of authority have a responsibility to help others to grow.

The people in today's gospel reading who heard Jesus speak and saw him cast out demons rightly marvelled at his authority because they saw the congruence between what he said and how he acted. He helped people to grow by freeing them from the legalism with which their appointed teachers, the scribes, wanted to burden them. Like so many other people appointed to positions of authority, the scribes subscribed to the belief that it was status, position and power which bestowed authority and gave them the right to impose their directives on the ordinary people who had neither education nor status. Jesus put the lie to this by reaching out to the people with kindness, respect and compassion. Unlike the scribes, Jesus did not set out to enforce anything. Instead, he encouraged and inspired by what he said and how he acted. In so doing, he demonstrated just what genuine authority really looks like.

It's not coincidental that, in today's gospel, Mark has Jesus silencing both scribes and demons. In so doing, Mark is suggesting that both groups are similar. To the people of Jesus' day, "demons" were anything harmful that could not be readily explained. The fact that Jesus silences whatever demon it was that controlled the man who came to Jesus' attention is confirmation of the genuineness of what he says. The combination of what Jesus says and

does reduce the scribes to silence and underlines that Jesus is blessed with genuine authority.

The message for us out of all this is twofold. First and foremost is the message that neither election nor appointment bestows authority. They may very well give power to leaders who are appointed or elected. But true leaders grow into authority and demonstrate that their authority is genuine to the extent that they breathe life and independence and self-determination into those they lead. Secondly, there is a message for us all about the “demons” we allow to control us. The demons of addiction are the ones that are spectacular and obvious. Most of us manage to avoid those. But there are other more subtle, less obvious demons that can cripple, control or diminish us. For instance, there are the demons of anger, refusal to forgive, vindictiveness, always being right and a gossiping or cutting tongue. From time to time, we can allow any one of these or a hundred others to take possession of us. Today’s gospel is an invitation to us to bring our demons to Jesus for healing.

At different times in our lives we are all expected to teach, to guide to lead or to serve. Today’s gospel is a reminder to us that we will be successful and credible in any or all of these roles to the extent that we reflect the empathy, the compassion, the encouragement and the selflessness of Jesus. It’s only then that we will begin to love others into life and to demonstrate real authority.