

Sunday Homily

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY

31 JANUARY 2021

YEAR B

“They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”

Mark 1:22

Illustration

One friend was telling another recently of the large, inner-city comprehensive school where she had worked as a secretary for a number of years. This school served a very deprived area, one rife with social problems. The hard-working and dedicated staff strove to maintain a level of discipline that would enable them to actually teach and the children to learn; but it was an uphill struggle and staff absences through stress-related illnesses were commonplace.

“But”, said the school secretary, “there is one staff member who never seems to have any difficulty. And she teaches RE – not usually the children’s favourite subject! She’s one of the youngest teachers we have and she’s quite petite and very quiet – you hardly notice her in the staffroom. Most teachers find that they have to call the ‘school patrol’ at least a couple of times a term – they’re a group who walk the corridors and who can be called on if things get a bit out of hand in a classroom. But this teacher has never had to call them, and when she’s in the classroom you never hear a sound out of place – even with the toughest of classes. Most of the lads tower over her but she never even raises her voice; she has them eating out of her hand! I don’t understand it – it doesn’t make sense.”

Gospel Teaching

Mark records this episode at the very beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, setting the tone for all that follows. On the face of it the scene is a very ordinary one: Jesus and his disciples attend the synagogue on the sabbath. But there, the commonplace ends: rather than going to the synagogue to be taught, Jesus himself begins to teach. We are not told what his teaching was; only that “he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes”. As the Gospel narrative progressed, it was not to be long before Jesus’ teaching and his popularity with the crowds became a source of question and resentment amongst the religious hierarchy.

One of the people in the synagogue is a man with an unclean spirit. The man approaches Jesus, and the unclean spirit calls out in recognition: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” Perhaps the greatest irony here is that, among all those in the synagogue that sabbath,

the unclean spirit alone recognises who Jesus really is, and the source of his authority: "I know who you are, the Holy One of God". Jesus does not want or need that kind of acknowledgement and sternly rebukes the unclean spirit. But the crowd is captivated and Jesus' fame spreads.

Application

The nature of genuine authority is difficult to define, and it is not always to be found in the most obvious places. In our opening illustration, the slightly built, relatively inexperienced young woman teacher was the last person anyone would expect to be able to command the attention and respect of a class of rebellious fifteen-year-olds. And in today's Gospel a young Jewish man from an obscure background is recognised by his hearers as having an authority far beyond that of their usual, more experienced teachers.

So how are we to recognise genuine authority, and how are we to distinguish it from what is bogus? A key factor seems to be consistency: do this person's words match up with the kind of person they seem to be? There is a saying, "I can't hear what you say, because who you are is shouting too loudly." If the words we hear are at variance with the person speaking them, then those words will not ring true. There is a great deal of teaching in the New Testament about being alert to the possibility that some people – or spirits – may not be what they seem: "Test the spirits, to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1); "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 7:21); "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit" (Matthew 7:18).

Amid today's clamour of competing voices, the need for wise and prayerful discernment has never been greater. And as we seek to discern that which is true in the world around us, so we seek also to discern the truth amidst the competing voices we find within ourselves. As humans we are weak, fallible and riddled with inconsistency. But in Jesus there is no inconsistency: the person and the message are one.