

Homily for the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 31st,2021

Mark 1:21:28

Today from the Gospel of Mark, we've heard proclaimed the dramatic encounter of Jesus with an unclean spirit. On the face of it is a very perplexing reading, beginning with Jesus teaching in the synagogue; being acclaimed by the people as one who teaches with authority not like the scribes.

Then he encounters the unclean spirit who recognizes Jesus as the holy one of God, who Jesus commands to be silent and casts out; and then once again we hear the synagogue congregation expressing their astonishment at how Jesus in driving out the demon, teaches with authority.

We might be tempted to be sidetracked by the spectacle of it all, a demon speaking aloud, convulsing the poor unfortunate he possessed and coming out of the man with a shriek.

Or as dutiful children of the Enlightenment, we might feel somewhat alienated and put off or even embarrassed by this account of Jesus exorcising the diabolical, which we might think to be so far removed from ourselves as modern people (even as modern Catholics!)

But I'd like to suggest this incident from the gospel is much closer to home than we'd like to think.

Its relevance to each of us can be discovered by pondering the way in which the congregation of the synagogue at Capernaum, like the chorus in an ancient Greek play calls our attention to the question of authority at the beginning and the end of today's gospel portion.

First, a bit of background. At the time of Jesus, the learned teachers of the Law were the scribes and Pharisees. When they taught, they based their

teachings on those who had schooled them in the Law and the Prophets. It would have been impious, blasphemous even, for any Jewish teacher to teach by their own authority – only God, the divine lawgiver could do that.

Throughout the four gospels we hear Jesus use this formula in teaching: ‘It is written thus and so forth, but I tell you...’ What would have been apparent to those hearing Jesus teach in this manner, (but not necessarily apparent to us), was that the carpenter’s son from Nazareth, was claiming divine authority as a new Lawgiver when he spoke on his own authority.

Hence their astonishment.

It is at this crucial moment the man possessed by an unclean spirit cries out:

“What have you come to do to us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God.”

There is so much going on these words.

The unclean spirit, one of that invisible host of spirits created by God at the beginning, but who rejected the authority of God, immediately recognizes who Jesus is. While the perplexed and astonished members of the synagogue scratched their heads and wondered who this new teacher might be, the unclean spirit fully comprehends who Jesus is and the threat that he poses to spirits like himself.

But it turns out that acknowledging God, or in our case acknowledging that God exists, is never enough. The unclean spirits, the demons, all acknowledge God’s existence. But what is missing is that they reject his authority over them.

A phrase taken from the twentieth verse of the second chapter of book of the prophet Jeremiah, says it all: “I will not serve!”. In the Latin of the

Vulgate, "*non serviam*," the Catholic tradition has attributed these words to the Evil One and the rebellious angels.

The English Protestant poet Milton echoes this in his epic "Paradise Lost". Having been flung into hell, Satan says:

Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven."

With that '*non serviam*' Satan and his fallen angels definitively and for all time rejected God's authority over them.

So the unclean spirit already knows the answer to the question he asks of Jesus: "What have you to do with us?" (alternatively translated as "What do you want with us?")

The unclean spirit knows better than we do that God, requires this, in the words of the Book of Deuteronomy:

" You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength."

As one commentator on this verse writes in the New Jerusalem Bible:

"Loving God is not a matter of choice, it is a command. This love, which echoes God's love for his people, embraces fear of God, the duty of service and the observance of God's commandments."

Thus, it is not enough to believe in God. Even the demons can do that. One must have faith, that is, trust in God's love and wisdom and respond with love and obedience.

Next, the demon asks Jesus:

"Have you come to destroy us?"

Yes! Of course Jesus has! But the unclean spirit already knew the answer to the question before he asked it.

For as the demon knows all too well, Jesus, who has been obedient in all things to his Father, even to the Cross and death, will be given authority over all things.

As St. Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians writes:

"...then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to his God and Father, when he has destroyed every sovereignty and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet."

All things, including the unclean spirit and his companion spirits given over to malice and evil in opposition to God's authority, will be put "*under his feet*", and be made subject to his will, however much they resist it.

Finally, the unclean spirit proclaims Jesus to be the Messiah.:

"I know who you are, the Holy One of God!"

But as we noted before, so what?

Recognizing Jesus as the holy one of God, while defying his authority, means nothing. In fact, it is to his condemnation.

They literally have nothing to say to each other.

Which is why Jesus immediately silences the unclean spirit, and drives him out of the wretched man that he has possessed

The congregation in the synagogue was amazed, and said:

"What is this? A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him."

There is so much irony in what they're saying.

The demonic spirit is unclean precisely because it has refused to bend voluntarily to the will of God. Yet it is compelled by the power of God to do God's bidding. Jesus says go, leave, be gone, and the unclean spirit does what he commands.

Not willingly of course, but unwillingly.

Jesus not only teaches with authority, his authority is recognized and obeyed even by those who, like the unclean spirit, absolutely reject and oppose it.

This demonstration of divine power is indeed an authoritative teaching!

So what does this mean for us as the sons and daughters of Adam?

Unlike the unclean spirits we have not definitively and for all eternity chosen to defy the will of God. In fact, by virtue of the grace of our baptism we have been given the virtue of faith and communion with God.

But nonetheless, throughout our lives we find ourselves often in dangerous territory.

In a fallen world, the result of our first parent's foolish but consequential refusal to serve God by defying his will for them, each one of us has within us a spirit of defiance and rebelliousness that resists loving God with our whole heart, mind and strength.

Corrupting our will is that voice, loud or quiet that says to God: *"I will not serve."*

This refusal to serve God can take a variety of forms. It may manifest itself as adamant refusal; thoughtless indiscipline or slothful paralysis. But at its core our willful refusal to do God's will is grounded in pride: I prefer my will, in the end, to Your will.

"I will not serve."

Fortunately, by grace we have the capacity to ask for ourselves the questions which the unclean spirit asked of Jesus.

"What do you want with us?"

Everything.

What Jesus wants is nothing less than that we come to know him, to love him, to obey him as he knew, loved and obeyed his Father in heaven. He wants us to live by those words that he taught us, *"your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."*

"Have you come to destroy us?"

It might seem that way, because Jesus has come to destroy the pride and self-will that tempts us to refuse to love God with our whole heart, mind, and strength.

But because Jesus himself surrendered his self-will in order to lead us into the communion of love that is the kingdom of heaven, we can be confident that by surrendering in faith and trust our own self-will to follow and obey Jesus, we gain everything and lose nothing worth possessing.

Aligning our will with the will of Jesus, with the will of his Father, is for us as his disciples, the work of our entire lives. But we can be confident that we are aided in this work by the power of the Holy Spirit, poured out upon us at baptism, renewed in the holy Eucharist, and alive and active within us every moment of our daily life.

Thus as redeemed sinners, resolved as best we are able to serve God, we can and should rightly proclaim with thanksgiving and joy and faith - as the unclean spirit could not:

"I know who you are- the Holy One of God."

Rejoicing that Jesus truly is God's holy one, let us resolve to obey the Lord in all things great and small, confident that our obedience to his authority in our lives is the sure way to abundant life in this world and in the world to come.