

February 1, 2009

Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time

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Reading 1

[Dt 18:15-20](#)

Moses spoke to all the people, saying:

"A prophet like me will the LORD, your God, raise up for you
from among your own kin;
to him you shall listen.

This is exactly what you requested of the LORD, your God, at Horeb
on the day of the assembly, when you said,
'Let us not again hear the voice of the LORD, our God,
nor see this great fire any more, lest we die.'

And the LORD said to me, 'This was well said.

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their kin,
and will put my words into his mouth;
he shall tell them all that I command him.

Whoever will not listen to my words which he speaks in my name,
I myself will make him answer for it.

But if a prophet presumes to speak in my name
an oracle that I have not commanded him to speak,
or speaks in the name of other gods, he shall die.'"

Responsorial Psalm

[Ps 95:1-2, 6-7, 7-9](#)

R. If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Come, let us sing joyfully to the LORD;
let us acclaim the rock of our salvation.
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us joyfully sing psalms to him.

R. If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Come, let us bow down in worship;
let us kneel before the LORD who made us.
For he is our God,
and we are the people he shepherds, the flock he guides.

R. If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Oh, that today you would hear his voice:
"Harden not your hearts as at Meribah,
as in the day of Massah in the desert,
Where your fathers tempted me;
they tested me though they had seen my works."

R. If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Reading II

[1 Cor 7:32-35](#)

Brothers and sisters:

I should like you to be free of anxieties.

An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord,
how he may please the Lord.

But a married man is anxious about the things of the world,

how he may please his wife, and he is divided.
An unmarried woman or a virgin is anxious about the things of the Lord,
so that she may be holy in both body and spirit.
A married woman, on the other hand,
is anxious about the things of the world,
how she may please her husband.
I am telling you this for your own benefit,
not to impose a restraint upon you,
but for the sake of propriety
and adherence to the Lord without distraction.

Gospel

[Mk 1:21-28](#)

Then they came to Capernaum,
and on the sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and taught.
The people were astonished at his teaching,
for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.
In their synagogue was a man with an unclean spirit;
he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?
Have you come to destroy us?
I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"
Jesus rebuked him and said,
"Quiet! Come out of him!"
The unclean spirit convulsed him and with a loud cry came out of him.
All were amazed and asked one another,
"What is this?
A new teaching with authority.
He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him."
His fame spread everywhere throughout the whole region of Galilee.

HOMILY

We hear from Moses today in our First Reading from the Book of Deuteronomy. The verses immediately before our Reading comprise a detailed warning about listening to or trusting in sorcerers, soothsayers and various forms of fortune-telling. The people who occupied the land, to which God is giving the Jews, did all these things. For their practices they are being dispossessed. Moses tells the people that a “prophet” will arise from their very ranks and they will listen to him. This prophet will speak the word of God guiding them in their faith. The prophet will speak, not on his own authority, but only what the prophet has heard from God. The authority comes from God through the prophet and is validated by how orderly life results from the prophet’s having listened and then spoken. The authority of the prophet comes from the Spirit, and when true leadership is grounded in the Spirit and built on the example of Christ – it does not control it liberates.

I have a distinct memory of a prophet growing up...he was right in my neighborhood – Jack Reilly, and he lived just a few streets away on Anthony Wayne Drive. It was winter in Pennsylvania, snowy, icy and one day at dusk there was a terrible accident – a young man Matt Eerdman lost control of his car on the ice hit a tree and then a young girl Maddie Reilly. She was sledding down her driveway into the cul- da-sac. Both died. The whole neighborhood was gripped in with grief, anger, fear, and anxiety – an evil spirit like we heard about in the gospel gripped our neighborhood. The Eerdman family was petrified of a lawsuit and the Reilly family received all the attention and sympathy. But both families were deep in grief, and both belonged to St. Isaac Jogues Parish.

At Matt’s funeral – Maddie’s father came forward and offered Matt’s father the sign of peace. Everyone was stunned! He told him that they needed each – they needed each other to get through this -- and that there would be no legal action – it was so powerful. Matt’s father nearly speechless simply gestured to Jack asking him to sit with their family for the rest of the funeral mass. With his few words and offer of peace Jack Reilly had dispelled the demon. He was a prophet – showing the power of forgiveness – he had literally freed the whole neighborhood from possession.

These next four Sunday-Gospels leading up to Lent, portray Jesus healing individuals from their various illnesses. Today we watch Him healing of a man with an unclean spirit. This was most likely an emotionally disturbed person whose behavior was not appropriate to being in a synagogue. Physical illness or any irregular behavior was attributed to personal sin or presence of evil. This is the first of Jesus’ healings in Mark and His authority is manifested within the walls of the Holy. What is taking place here is public announcement of Who Jesus really is. The first to recognize Him is, guess who, the devil or force of evil and destruction. That unclean spirit knows firsthand, the presence of the eternal Good – knows of God’s unconditional love for us. There is a bit of a private conversation, which we hear - Jesus commands the Evil Spirit to be “quiet”.

Now there are all sorts of examples of crying out in Churches and synagogues – I remember once during that quiet period after Communion, hearing a very worried, and very loud voice of a little child – crying out. It had been announced that there were doughnuts and coffee available after mass in the social hall. During the second collection the quiet in the Church was broken as heard, “No Dad, that’s for the doughnuts!”

This story of crying out is different - Jesus is saying to the unclean spirit - be quiet “I know that you know, who I am - but I do not want evil to announce My Name and mission.” There is a simple form of secrecy going on in Mark’s Gospel. Jesus desires that individuals themselves come to the awareness and acceptance of Him as Savior. Jesus’ authority comes from the Spirit and when individuals like Jack who come forward – they are inspired by the same Spirit – to announced that forgiveness is more powerful than grief, more powerful than the fear of retribution – Jack like Jesus dispelled the evil.

You might say “Oh sure -- it is obvious in these dramatic actions”, but let me

assure you that it is just as present in the daily events of our lives that we see glimpses of Who Jesus is. If we listen carefully to the statements made by those watching at the scene in the gospel they point to statements of faith – perhaps without even knowing it. The people reply: “He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.” They say these things in amazement, but we, the listeners, hear them as statements of faith. The bystanders also ask a very important question: , "What is this? A new teaching with authority.” The bystanders name the Spirit at work.

Jesus’ teaching and healing through the authority of the Spirit was not the sort of authority they were used to from the scribes and Pharisees. They were accustomed to an authority that places purity rules above the holy - instead of using purity regulations to protect they were used to control. Authority had become authoritarianism; which is authority that has ceased to struggle to become leadership. Because true leadership when built on the example of Christ does not control it liberates, it transforms. It sets people free like the man bound by the unclean spirit in the gospel.

Our culture has a tendency to speak of leadership in a very limited form – charismatic leadership. This bias shapes our expectations and structures our criticism. Certainly there is still a necessary place for the charismatic leader, but we dare not limit leadership to just the charismatic type.. Such limitations mean that we can far too easily overlook the day to day chance to be leaders in a different but thoroughly legitimate sense. Our acting - with Christ-like authority will begin to coincide with leadership qualities in lives. This form of leadership is not easy. It is humble, quiet, painstaking, usually un-sensational, full of risks and doubts often lacking satisfactions and nearly always deprived of publicity and kudos. It is the mother who stands bleary eyed over a sick child at 3 am, it the teacher who fights through another batch of homework essays when he longs to watch the last quarter of the game. It is the professional who files an exact expense account when no one is looking over his shoulder. It is all of these things and so many more, hidden but utterly good things – things that liberate and bring out the best in ourselves and others. This form of leadership is almost wholly unacknowledged by the world as leadership. YET it is a form of leadership which is truly rooted in the person of Christ because it is authentic and transformative leadership. As Christians we know that true leadership begins with the person of Christ. His example and person shout loudly of serving not being served – calling forth true potential and the possibility for wholeness. This is what Christ comes to proclaim -- and he was not for one second going to allow an unclean spirit to name it for us. Jesus desires that we ourselves come to the awareness and acceptance of Him as Savior.

Jesus’ speaking with authority was so powerful because it was an authority grounded not in authoritarianism but in the Spirit in true leadership. The teachings of Jesus which lead to His death are not all easy to live. We have unclean spirits which naturally tend us toward disorder, and which give authority to power, position and privilege. When formal authority receives independent value - we experience the controlled individual or group. We see parents not loving their children but manipulating them, we see teachers not educating their students but controlling them. When authority is used in this way the use of power is secretive, discussion is closed and draws upon limited competence. The controlled are told what they may and may not do, not what they can achieve. They are reminded of the importance of the structure -- not of their own importance or that of the community. The characteristics of such a structure are unmistakable – fear, anxiety, joyless security, rejection of creative risk, growing apathy. While true prophetic, transformative leadership is just the opposite. It is characterized by creativity and joy, it calls forth the best in those led – it liberates them into the fullness of their potential as individuals and as a group.

I will never forget Jack Reilly’s prophetic example – not because of how it transformed our neighborhood ---- or because of how it helped two families begin to heal ---- NO --- I will never forget his example because I want to imitate him. I want to be a leader like Christ – one who attracts followers not an entourage, one who has imitators not subordinates.

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