

4th Sunday of Ord. Time – Jan. 27-28, 2018

As we reflect on today's Scripture readings, it is helpful to know that the setting for today's first reading is the east side of the river Jordan. After many years of traveling in the desert, the people of Israel are ready to cross the river Jordan and enter the Promised Land.

Moses had been leading them since they had left slavery in Egypt, but now he knows that his life will soon be coming to an end and the people will have to enter the Promised Land without him. Basically, he is saying his "good-bye" to the people and assuring them that God will not leave them without leadership. He assures them that God will send them another prophet like himself who will speak God's word to them.

We usually think of a prophet as a person who foretells the future, and sometimes the prophets did, but the best definition of a prophet is given at the end of that first reading: a prophet is one who speaks God's word. All of this prepares us for the Gospel where we see Jesus speaking God's word with power and authority that amazes the people -- which Jesus still does today in each Mass, and why we should come to Mass, and why we should listen with our full attention. ("If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.")

Moving to the Gospel, it is interesting to note that we are still pretty much in the middle of the first chapter of Mark's Gospel. It seems that Mark moves very quickly to the key points that he wants to tell us and teach us about Jesus.

Mark tells us briefly about the work of John the Baptist preparing for the coming of Jesus, then Jesus's baptism, followed by his temptation in the desert, last week the call of

the first disciples, and now today the first of account of his teaching and his first miraculous action.

As we look at that first miracle, we see that Mark not only wants to tell us who Jesus is, but he also wants us to know that Jesus was not afraid of the evil powers of this world and that he is willing to face them head on.

Jesus goes with his first disciples to the synagogue in the village of Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee, and as he begins to teach he is confronted by evil -- a man with an unclean spirit. Here we have a foreshowing of what is to come, and, as we know, the end where Jesus will lose his life in a confrontation with evil in his suffering and death on the cross.

The evil spirit in today's Gospel shouts out: "I know who you are -- the Holy One of God". -- This comes from an understanding that if we know the name of something or someone we have a certain amount of control over them. But as we see, Jesus' power is clearly much greater and he casts the evil spirit out of the man by a simple command: "Quiet! Come out of him." The forces of evil are confronted by Jesus' powerful authority and teaching. The man's convulsion is a sign of the transformation that Jesus' new authoritative teaching will have on the world. Jesus's teaching and authority are so powerful that the man is nearly torn apart in the process of being freed from the evil spirit.

Jesus' mission in this world necessarily involves a confrontation with evil, suffering and death. We have here not a picture of a "lilies of the field" Jesus but the Jesus who encounters, battles and is victorious over evil.

In today's gospel reading, the people were amazed and asked one another, "What is this? A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him. You will notice that Jesus' teaching is always consistent. There is no division between his words and his actions. There is no fear of how people might react to him or beating around the bush. Jesus teaches with authority, and if anyone wondered about his teaching authority, they do not need to look any further than this man from whom the unclean spirit was expelled.

Seeing here and in all of Jesus' life his power over death and all forces of destruction should console all who in any way feel overwhelmed by life and its difficulties.

It is significant too that Jesus' disciples were with him during this encounter. No sooner had they been called by Jesus to be his followers than they encounter evil.

We may not like to hear it, but Christian life (and in fact any human life) will be filled with encounters with evil. We learn in today's reading that Jesus is more powerful than these evils.

Once we become followers of Jesus we will encounter temptations, challenges and hostility. Some might like to think being in Christ frees us from these encounters, our lived experience teaches us differently.

Even though we will continue to face such encounters, we are comforted in knowing that Jesus has authority over all. One preacher put it this way: "Rest assured in your baptism." By that he meant that he meant that our baptism configures us to Christ who will be with us always.

In fact we are given a share in that authority of Jesus and every day in the decisions we make at work, at home or in the community we can exercise our authority in life-giving and liberating ways as Jesus did.

Every day we find ourselves in the position of teaching and comforting and encouraging others. Helping someone with homework, might not seem that liberating, but to a person stuck on a math problem, it may be just the grace that they needed.

Sometimes we can find that unclean spirit that Jesus casts out of the poor man in the Gospel as a voice in us that speaks of revenge, anger, greed, or fear to act. As we become aware of any negative spirits within ourselves, use the authority of Jesus that you have to simply say: “In the name of Jesus, I renounce the spirit of – anger, revenge, self-hatred, lust, selfishness, pride, --- whatever.” -- Again – it very easy – just say: “In the name of Jesus, I renounce or am throwing out whatever negative or evil spirit that you become aware of. – Of course, the great sacrament of deliverance and spiritual healing is the sacrament of reconciliation. There is absolutely no sin that Jesus can not forgive or overcome in us. He waits to share this mercy with us.

In all kinds of ways too we are called to be teachers and healers like Jesus for others who feeling overwhelmed or that their life is out of control. – Children, for example, are natural healers. Their smiles and affection can easily brighten one’s day.

In all our acts of compassion and generosity we can speak with the voice of Christ to drive out the unclean spirits that possess our minds and hearts and keep us from the peace and grace that God has for us.

How are you in Jesus being asked to heal the world? How are we using the great authority and power of his words and teaching that Jesus has shared with us?